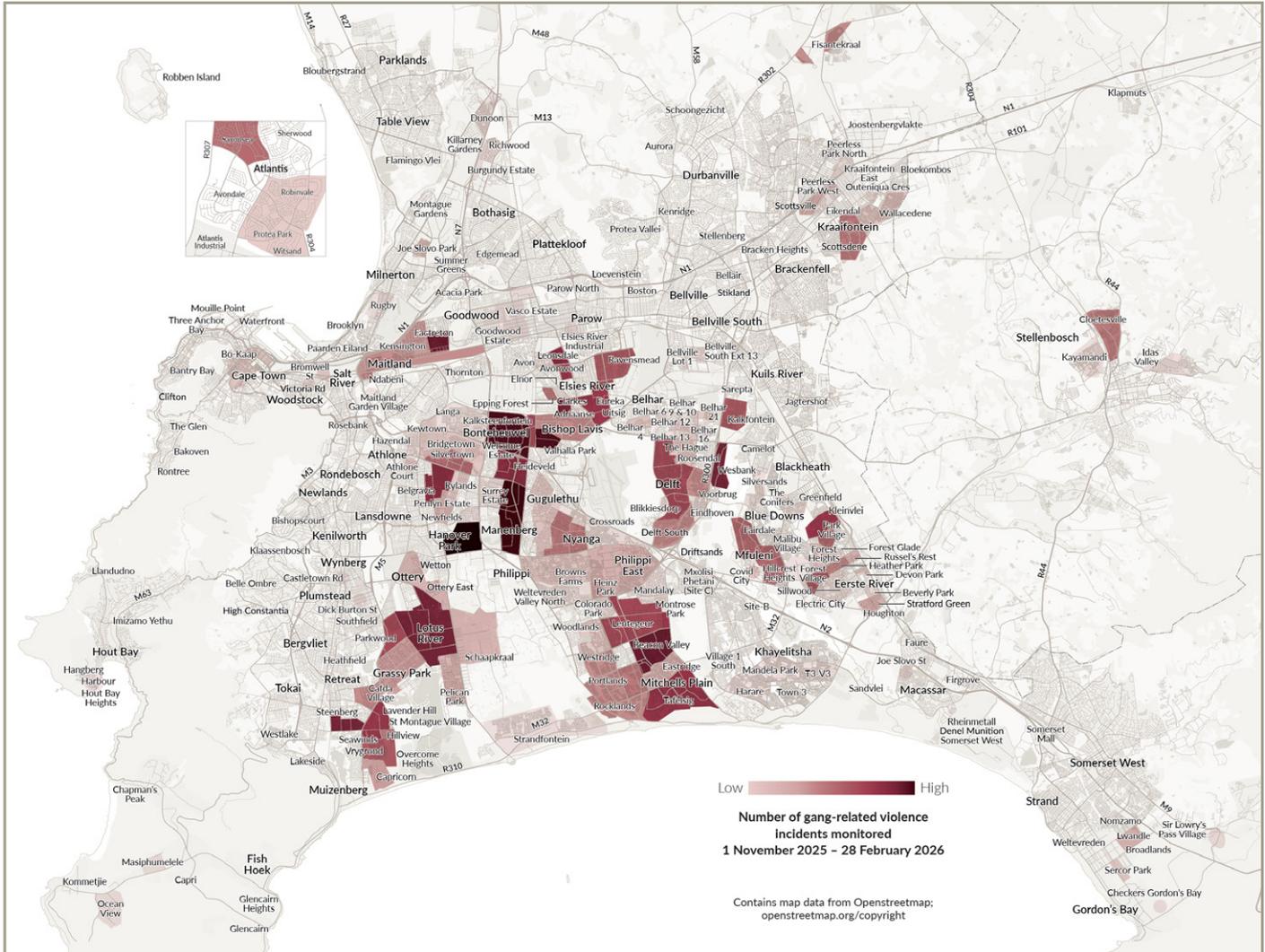




# WESTERN CAPE GANG MONITOR



**IN THIS ISSUE**

During the monitoring period (see heatmap above), hotspots of gang violence were closely linked to fragmentation dynamics – an issue explored in detail in this report – as well as territorial expansion. Conflict triggered by ‘floor-crossing’ is fuelling instability in Factreton, Kensington and Mitchells Plain. In Manenberg, the Fancy Boys’s territorial push is ongoing, as they continue to exploit a fragmented gang landscape. In Hanover Park, particularly, factional splits are a major driver of unrest, while a leadership struggle within the Laughing Boys is further escalating tensions. In Lotus River and Ottery, clashes between the Mongrels and their rivals reflect long-standing territorial disputes. In the Steenberg and Muizenberg precincts, the leadership battle within the Junky Funky Kids has resulted in fatalities.

This issue traces four developments that have shaped the Western Cape’s criminal landscape over the past quarter:

- Floor-crossing defections and leadership struggles fragment an already charged criminal landscape.
- Evaluating extraordinary measures for the Cape Flats gang crisis amid the latest military deployment.
- Area profile: Cape Flats gangs and international organized crime extend their influence to Saldanha Bay.
- ‘Klipgooiër’ culture – a notable gang recruitment pathway and a key early sign of conflict.



## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This is the eighth 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.

## Drivers of fragmentation and gang disruption

Since 2023, the Gang Monitor has tracked accelerating gang fragmentation as a key factor driving violence in the Western Cape.<sup>1</sup> Internal instability, breakaway factions and shifting alliances have been shown to increase volatility and complicate law enforcement responses. Recent monitoring suggests that fragmentation continues to be a defining feature of the gang landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than an isolated event, fragmentation should be recognized as a structural process that is reshaping the way gangs in the Western Cape organize and compete. The phenomenon manifests in three main ways:

- defection to rival gangs, known as 'floor-crossing'
- internal leadership contests
- the formation of new gangs.

This issue focuses on the first two, which have become particularly prominent over the past few years.

These three indicators offer a valuable framework for understanding gang dynamics. Sudden defections, visible leadership challenges and the rapid formation of new groups signal weakening internal cohesion and a heightened risk of escalation. Monitoring these factors can help identify areas where violence may occur.

Although fragmentation can increase short-term instability, it can also dilute the dominance of established gangs by breaking up their territorial and market monopolies. Whether this reduces or intensifies violence in the long term, however, remains contested.

### WHAT DRIVES FLOOR-CROSSING?

- Economic incentives (access to drugs, guns and money)
- Aggressive recruitment campaigns by expansionist gangs
- Generational divides and perceived erosion of gang loyalty
- Perceived marginalization within legacy hierarchies
- Safety concerns for lower-ranking gang members
- Strategic realignment during disputes over territory

### 'Guns and secrets crossed the floor'

Recent floor-crossing defections involving some of the Western Cape's oldest and most powerful gangs are further fragmenting an already charged criminal landscape. Over the past quarter, members of the Americans, Hard Livings, Laughing Boys and Mongrels have switched allegiances, resulting in retaliatory killings and internal conflict.<sup>3</sup>

While not a new phenomenon, floor-crossing is becoming increasingly common and playing a more prominent role in gang warfare.<sup>4</sup> A former 28s gang general describes it as an 'accelerated trend', adding that 'almost every gang has started doing it'. According to Lieutenant General Thembisile Patekile, the Western Cape police commissioner, the practice is directly linked to recent spikes in violence: 'That is when the conflict starts. [Gang members] are leaving, with secrets, from one side to the other. They must deal with you, which often means killing.'<sup>5</sup>

### RECENT FLOOR-CROSSING INCIDENTS

- Jester Kids joined the Americans, Clever Kids and Hard Livings
- Many Americans and Inglourious Basterds (IGBs) joined the Fancy Boys. IGBs defected to the Hard Livings.
- Ghetto Kids joined the Hard Livings and Fancy Boys
- Americans joined the Dollar Kids
- Mongrels became Only the Family (the OTFs)

Previous Gang Monitor research has documented how the Fancy Boys recruited members of rival gangs by offering them money, guns and drugs.<sup>6</sup> Since then, they have rapidly expanded their territory across the Cape Flats, as well as their pool of foot soldiers. Encouraged by this success, other gangs have followed suit.<sup>7</sup>

The increase in defections has been attributed to an age-driven difference in attitudes. Younger members reportedly find it easier to relinquish gang traditions or codes in favour of better

economic prospects.<sup>8</sup> 'They have no loyalty, because they are children and they can be pulled with a packet of sweets,' an Americans gang boss said. 'I find it very hard to trust my own soldiers.'<sup>9</sup>

Floor-crossing contributes to insecurity by expanding the pool of potential gang targets. It sustains cycles of retaliation and deepens the vulnerability of individuals caught between rival gangs. Although defecting members have cited personal safety as their motivation, floor-crossing often leaves them more exposed to violence. By joining a new gang, they inherit its rivalries and become exposed to its enemies. They also become a security

risk for their former gang, because of their knowledge of internal operations. As a former 28s general put it: 'Guns and secrets crossed the floor with those mutineers.'<sup>10</sup>

The account of a former Ghetto Kids member who moved over to the Hard Livings illustrates how defectors become targets for multiple groups. He is unable to return to his old neighbourhood for fear of being killed by his former gang, while at the same time rival gangs are intent on retaliation. '[The] Americans are there and they want to shoot me, because I shot one of their *mense* [people],'<sup>11</sup> he said.

## CASE STUDY: THE AMERICANS vs THE NICE TIME KIDS

The war between the Americans and the Nice Time Kids provides a snapshot of the practice of floor-crossing. In October 2025, clashes erupted between the two groups in Kensington and Facticeon following the shooting of an Americans member.<sup>12</sup> This conflict is ongoing (see heatmap on p. 1). The root of the tensions was the defection of some members of the Young Americans (an Americans offshoot) to the Nice Time Kids.<sup>13</sup> The Young Americans – led by a lieutenant – reportedly took some of the gang's guns with them when they defected. Subsequently, individuals from the rival groups took to social media, threatening to shoot each other.<sup>14</sup>

The Nice Time Kids, while not as prominent as the Americans, are one of the Western Cape's oldest gangs.<sup>15</sup> They mainly operate in Rocklands (Mitchells Plain), Facticeon, Bellville, Salt River and

Belhar.<sup>16</sup> The two groups have been at odds since the 1980s, but the recent escalation of hostilities is reportedly due to aggressive expansion strategy employed by the Nice Time Kids. These tactics have included recruiting from rival gangs and forming alliances to expand their territory and resource base.<sup>17</sup>

Members of the Nice Time Kids have reportedly also been sighted in Salt River and Woodstock.<sup>18</sup> Some interviewees claim this is due to displacement by the Americans. However, according to others, the group is deliberately drawing in members of the Wonder Kids and the Americans. Clashes between the Americans and the Nice Time Kids have also spread to Mitchells Plain, where both gangs occupy territory, adding to the area's already high levels of violence.

Floor-crossing gives rise to a number of tensions. By disseminating sensitive information and undermining trust, it creates new points of conflict and fuels cycles of retaliation. Defectors often become targets for their former allies and rivals, drawing additional actors into disputes and increasing the scale and unpredictability of violence.

Floor-crossing is thus an early warning sign of heightened insecurity. It also highlights the limitations of reactive policing and violence prevention approaches. Monitoring defections and signs of internal distrust can help anticipate escalations. This would allow additional resources to be allocated to hotspot areas, thereby reducing the risk to affected communities.

## Internal leadership struggles leave a trail of casualties

Internal instability within Western Cape gangs, and the associated risk of fragmentation, undermines leadership structures, fuels violence and erodes community safety. When combined with long-standing inter-gang rivalries, these tensions generate highly unpredictable and often deadly conflict dynamics.

Previous monitoring covered the leadership struggle within the Ghetto Kids gang, which erupted between two brothers, 'Hadjie' and 'Biggie', following the assassination of their father, Faizel 'Sheikh' Manuel, the gang's former leader, in May 2021. Although control passed to the two sons, tensions between them quickly escalated, dividing the gang's older and younger members. This eventually triggered an open conflict that led to the formation of a splinter group, Only the Family (OTFs).<sup>19</sup> This factional dispute continued to fuel violence in Hanover Park over the monitoring period (see heatmap on p. 1).

## CURRENT AND RECENT INTERNAL LEADERSHIP DISPUTES

- JFKs ('Ibi' vs Jason Arendse)
- Laughing Boys ('Peppa' vs 'U-Boy')
- Conflict between the two brothers who led the Ghetto Kids ('Hadjie' and 'Biggie') before the group split into the OTFs

Recent developments within the Junky Funky Kids (JFKs), one of the most dominant gangs in the province, also exemplify this pattern. A power struggle between the current boss and an alleged faction leader has resulted in clashes and a surge in fatalities, particularly in Steenberg and Muizenberg precincts (see heatmap on p. 1).<sup>20</sup> Nearly 100 gang-related murders occurred in JFKs territory in Muizenberg from January 2025 to February 2026.<sup>21</sup> About 70 of these deaths were reportedly the result of JFKs infighting,<sup>22</sup> with Western Cape Police Commissioner Patekile confirming that the violence was the result of a 'leadership split'.<sup>23</sup>

Factions tend to emerge within gangs when members challenge the established structure of the organization or the way it is run. Some gangs operate with a vertical chain of command, where decision-making authority and control over resources such as drugs, money and weapons are concentrated at the top. Others distribute power laterally among several leaders, each exercising autonomy over their own operations.<sup>24</sup> The JFKs follow the latter model, and their current conflict reflects competing bids for influence: 'Ibi', reportedly the gang's current leader, is facing a challenge from Jason 'Fabulous' Arendse. According to field research for this monitor, Arendse is allegedly a JFKs hitman<sup>25</sup> who is seeking to assert control and overhaul the gang's structure.<sup>26</sup>

Under Ibi's leadership, the gang is run like a franchise, with territory spread across Ocean View, Muizenberg, Vrygrond, Capricorn, Steenberg, Coniston Park, Sheraton Park and Seawinds, and an established presence in Lavender Hill and Retreat.<sup>27</sup> Various leaders control different turf under the broader JFKs umbrella, with the freedom and autonomy to manage their areas as they see fit, while still benefiting from shared access to drug supply chains and foot soldiers. Arendse, however, is reportedly pushing for a more centralized structure in order to consolidate control.

According to our research, support for Arendse grew among foot soldiers after he allegedly orchestrated the revenge killing of Vrygrond taxi owner Dingalomoya Cintso,<sup>28</sup> in retaliation for the murder of Ashley 'Essie' Phillips, the JFKs's leader in Vrygrond and Capricorn, 10 weeks earlier.<sup>29</sup> At the time of Cintso's assassination, Arendse was being held in Pollsmoor Prison, charged alongside two others with the kidnapping and murder of 57-year-old Charlene Josephs in Lavender Hill in July 2024.<sup>30</sup> Cintso's murder earned Arendse a high rank in the 26s prison gang, and is said to have signalled to JFKs members that he is an effective

and decisive figure. This reportedly led to one of his co-accused agreeing to take full responsibility for Josephs' kidnapping and murder. Arendse was released from Pollsmoor on 22 July 2025, with all charges against him withdrawn.<sup>31</sup> Five months later, he was arrested again, after police thwarted a planned attack on a witness outside the Wynberg court. While this incident was not explicitly linked to the JFKs leadership conflict, prosecutors named Arendse as a 'leader' of the JFKs, and he faces the heaviest charges of those accused.<sup>32</sup> He remains in custody.

Meanwhile, a mass shooting in Gordon's Bay in January 2026 points to a possible escalation in the gang's internal struggle.<sup>33</sup> Two senior JFKs figures, known by the street names 'Potties' and 'Tandjies', were reportedly killed in the attack.<sup>34</sup> The hit is alleged to have been ordered by Arendse.<sup>35</sup>

These incidents illustrate how internal leadership disputes can spill over into public spaces, where brazen attacks become a strategy for signalling power and mobilizing support among would-be leaders. Such violence puts bystanders at risk, especially when attacks occur unpredictably and in locations not typically associated with gang conflict. In the case of the JFKs, Arendse's role in recent confrontations has reinforced his credibility and bolstered his follower base. There is a growing danger that increasingly visible shows of force may be used to further consolidate his position.

## WHAT DRIVES INTERNAL LEADERSHIP CONTESTS?

- Competing operational models
- Control over drugs, guns and money
- Lower-ranking members feeling excluded from revenue and decision-making
- Prison gang hierarchy and legitimacy
- Competition for loyalty among foot soldiers
- Leadership vacuums and succession disputes after the arrest, incarceration or weakening of a leader

### Prison affiliation and leadership legitimacy

Arendse's position within the JFKs is also influenced by hierarchy and identity. While Ibi is a 'Frans' (a non-prison gang member), Arendse is a member of the 26s prison gang, which gives him a higher standing in the eyes of many of his peers. Younger JFKs members reportedly see this as a reason to back him.<sup>36</sup> He was also recently promoted to the rank of general within the 26s military-style structure, strengthening his status both behind bars and among those 26s recently released from prison who have ties to the JFKs.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Arendse was a foot soldier in the JFKs until recently, and is seen as having a down-to-earth approach, in contrast with Ibi's more autocratic leadership style.

Arendse also has a grassroots recruitment strategy that adds to his strengths. Whereas Ibi's associates reportedly leave junior gang members in custody while they await trial, Arendse has reportedly started paying their bail.<sup>38</sup> The costs are often beyond the means of lower-tier gang members, such as runners and lookouts, even those arrested on minor charges such as drug possession. According to a police source, this tactic is making Arendse even more popular: 'These are guys who Ibi's lieutenants have forgotten about, and Fabulous is now buying their loyalty.'<sup>39</sup>

### Factional expansion and recruitment

The power struggle within the JFKs has also begun to pull in other players. The Flakka Kids, a JFKs breakaway active in Military Heights, which controls around half of the gang territory in Lavender Hill,<sup>40</sup> have joined the conflict, reportedly aligning with Ibi. The move may have been facilitated by the offer of drug dealing turf in areas the Flakka Kids have repeatedly attempted to seize by force. This shift supports earlier police assessments that the war would escalate to include the JFKs's affiliates and allies.<sup>41</sup>

This form of factional expansion differs from individual recruitment in both scale and impact. It introduces additional weapons, shooters and territorial claims into the conflict, creating further points of tension and making it harder for a single group to prevent escalation. As more actors become invested in the outcome of a leadership dispute, the likelihood of retaliation, and of violence spreading to neighbouring areas, increases. Taken together, these dynamics show how internal leadership conflicts can result in gang-related violence on a wider scale.

### Likely trajectory and implications for monitoring

Despite the volatility of the current situation, a formal split within the JFKs remains unlikely.<sup>42</sup> Intra-gang violence tends to be driven by personal rivalries and competing claims to legitimacy rather than territory alone. Such conflicts are usually zero-sum, only ending when one faction is eliminated or the leadership capitulates. However, unless the dispute is resolved, it will likely remain a significant driver of violence in 2026.

Shifting internal alliances suggest that further clashes are likely, particularly in response to arrests, changes in the balance of power or acts of retaliation. The involvement of prison-aligned actors and breakaway groups has also broadened the scope of the conflict, making it more likely that instability will persist even if key figures are removed. Forthcoming issues of the Western Cape Gang Monitor will track these developments.

Ultimately, the trends outlined in this issue emphasize the need for monitoring approaches that recognize internal leadership instability as a key indicator of violence, rather than focusing exclusively on inter-gang rivalry. Policing efforts should therefore prioritize the early detection of such disputes, as well as shifts in internal alignment and prison-street linkages. Enforcement strategies that rely solely on territorial control are unlikely to curb violence during periods of internal fragmentation. This reinforces the importance of intelligence-led approaches that can identify organizational changes within gangs and anticipate the heightened risks that these pose to affected communities.

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## Beyond boots on the ground: Evaluating extraordinary measures for the Cape Flats gang crisis

In his State of the Nation Address on 12 February 2026, President Cyril Ramaphosa identified organized crime as 'the most immediate threat' facing South Africa.<sup>43</sup> He announced a strengthened national response to dismantle entrenched criminal networks, including the deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to support the police in combating gang violence in the Western Cape and Gauteng.<sup>44</sup>

Authorization for the military operation was granted on 4 March, and it is scheduled to run until 31 March 2027.<sup>45</sup> Troops have not yet been allocated to the Western Cape, as soldiers are reportedly undergoing specialized training to ensure they are adequately prepared for civilian engagement.<sup>46</sup> The army's role will also be limited: they will be permitted to conduct patrols, set up roadblocks and make arrests, but they will not be able to investigate crimes or build criminal cases.

The military has been sent into gang-affected communities on the Cape Flats before, but these interventions have historically failed to produce meaningful or lasting reductions in violence.<sup>47</sup> The current operation has elicited various responses from South African Police Service (SAPS) officers, community members, political decision-makers, civil society organizations, gang members and soldiers. The prevailing sentiment reflects previous GI-TOC research: while a visible military presence may temporarily suppress gang violence, it does not typically disrupt the underlying criminal economy.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, none of the gang members interviewed during the research for this monitoring report saw the army as a meaningful deterrent.<sup>49</sup> Several reported that they had continued their activities during previous deployments either by paying bribes to the police or by adapting their operations.<sup>50</sup> 'The army can't

really stop the business,' one drug dealer said. 'We don't move the drugs or guns out of the area – we just become more careful. I carry less on me and wait for the police to move on.'<sup>51</sup> Gang figures consistently emphasized that short-term military involvement does little to disrupt entrenched criminal economies.<sup>52</sup> Law enforcement officials and soldiers concurred. As one SAPS member put it: '[Gangs] will simply avoid operating in front of [troops].'<sup>53</sup> SANDF personnel also expressed reservations about being used for domestic operations, citing a lack of cooperation with the SAPS in past operations.<sup>54</sup>

Reactions from the community have been mixed. Many residents doubted that the army would be able to reduce gang violence in the long term, and some supported even stronger security interventions.<sup>55</sup> There were also concerns about overreach and human rights violations.<sup>56</sup> During the most recent operation, which took place in 2019, there was no statistically significant reduction in the homicide rate, aside from a temporary decrease in the month the army was active.<sup>57</sup> Law enforcement officers have also warned that gang violence is more likely to be displaced to nearby areas rather than eliminated.<sup>58</sup>

Political decision-makers have acknowledged the limitations of a military-only intervention. According to acting police minister Firoz Cachalia and Western Cape Police Commissioner Thembisile Patekile, army deployment is neither a 'magic bullet'<sup>59</sup> nor a permanent solution that will address the root causes of gang violence.<sup>60</sup> Rather, it is a temporary stabilization response that should be accompanied by the strengthening of routine policing and broader crime prevention measures.

### State of disaster?

A range of responses have been proposed to address the gang violence crisis in the Western Cape, each reflecting different assumptions about what is needed and the timeframe in which change can be achieved.

Provincial and city leaders have emphasized the need to strengthen crime intelligence and intelligence-led policing. To this end, 62 retired detectives were recently re-enlisted to SAPS in the Western Cape, in order to bolster the force's investigative capacity.<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, other stakeholders argue that the scale and persistence of the crisis demand measures that go beyond conventional policing. For some time, for instance, civil society has advocated for the declaration of a provincial state of disaster.

Under the Disaster Management Act, a disaster is broadly understood as a natural or human-made event that threatens lives, causes significant damage, or causes a 'significant disruption of the life of a community' beyond the affected parties' ability

to cope.<sup>62</sup> Past provincial disaster declarations in the Western Cape have been limited to natural events such as severe flooding, droughts and wildfires.<sup>63</sup> However, proponents of such a declaration argue that sustained gang violence on the Cape Flats – which has been described as a 'sustained humanitarian emergency' – clearly meets the severity threshold.<sup>64</sup>

It is also worth noting that while pressure has centred on calls for the Western Cape Provincial Government to declare a provincial state of disaster in response to gang violence, comparable demands for a national state of disaster have largely not been part of the debate. A national declaration would, in principle, unlock a wider set of powers and enable greater coordination and mobilization of resources across departments. It would also benefit the Eastern Cape and Gauteng. According to the office of the provincial premier, Alan Winde, policing and investigations fall under the authority of the national government. Consequently, any disaster declaration aimed at securing additional law enforcement resources would require action from national ministers.<sup>65</sup>

Although a disaster declaration expands the government's regulatory powers, these are firmly constrained by constitutional safeguards. Any limitation of rights must be proved to be necessary, evidence-based and proportionate, and courts can strike down unjustifiable measures. Given concerns about corruption and the potential for misuse of extraordinary powers, these protections are crucial. Table 1 summarizes what each extraordinary measure can deliver, along with their key limitations.

The SANDF deployment should be viewed as a tactical measure designed to stabilize the situation in the short term and prevent immediate loss of life. It cannot address the deeper institutional, social and economic conditions that allow gang violence to persist. In addition, better resourced national policing is essential. However, ultimately, enforcement on its own cannot tackle the complexity of the threat. What is required is a multi-sector response across departments such as social development, education, health, police oversight and community safety.

For any intervention to be effective, immediate stabilization efforts must be accompanied by a long-term strategic response, whether through a formal state of disaster or simply more coordinated and purposeful governance. Otherwise, short-term measures risk becoming unsustainable, merely displacing gang violence or giving gangs the opportunity to strategize, regroup and rearm.

What matters most is sustained institutional work to dismantle violent criminal networks, strengthen investigations and prosecutorial capacity, protect communities, restore trust in law enforcement, and address the deep-rooted social and economic conditions that enable gangs to flourish.

	Provincial state of disaster	National state of disaster	State of emergency
<b>What is it?</b>	A declaration by the premier under the Disaster Management Act that activates emergency powers and resources at provincial level in response to a crisis that overwhelms affected communities' ability to cope. The premier must consult the provincial cabinet before a declaration.	A declaration by the national minister of cooperative governance and traditional affairs under the Disaster Management Act that activates emergency powers and national government resources in response to a crisis that a province is unable to manage effectively on its own.	A declaration by the president under section 37 of the constitution – the most extreme measure in South African law – that permits the temporary suspension of certain constitutional rights to restore peace and order. It can be declared only where a crisis threatens 'the life of the nation' – meaning the functioning of the constitutional order– and where ordinary laws, including the Disaster Management Act, are insufficient.
<b>What can it do?</b>	Deploy provincial resources (e.g. Law Enforcement Advancement Plan officers, metro police); impose curfews and movement restrictions in hotspots; restrict alcohol sales; fast-track procurement of emergency equipment (e.g. CCTV, lighting); provide emergency shelters and humanitarian relief; and establish multi-agency coordination structures.	Everything a provincial declaration can do, plus the minister can direct the release of SAPS personnel, SANDF assets and other national government resources. It also triggers mandatory coordination between the relevant cabinet ministers – including the ministers of police and defence – and activates national institutional structures for large-scale, multi-agency responses. National disaster regulations can also override conflicting national legislation where the disaster requires it, which provincial regulations cannot.	Permits the temporary suspension of certain constitutional rights (e.g. freedom of movement, assembly and privacy), enabling measures such as detention without trial. Certain fundamental rights – including the rights to life and human dignity – can never be suspended. Every emergency measure must be 'strictly required by the emergency'. It is a last-resort mechanism and cannot be declared if less drastic measures, such as those available under the Disaster Management Act, have not first been tried.
<b>What are the limits?</b>	Lasts three months, extendable a month at a time. Every regulation must pass a 'strict necessity' test: the government must show, with evidence, that each measure is essential to addressing the disaster – not merely useful or convenient – and that there is no less restrictive way to achieve the same result. Courts can strike down any regulation that fails this test. The province cannot direct SAPS operations or deploy the military, as policing and defence are national competencies.	Subject to the same 'strict necessity' test and judicial oversight as the provincial state of disaster. The national framework was extensively tested by the courts during the COVID-19 national state of disaster. Judgments provide detailed precedent on how these powers operate, including the conditions for extending a declaration and the reviewability of regulations.	Carries the highest legal threshold of all three measures. Initially lasts only 21 days; extensions require National Assembly approval by increasing majorities after public debate. Unlike a state of disaster, in which constitutional rights remain intact, a state of emergency allows certain rights to be suspended. Each suspension must be individually justified as strictly required by the emergency.

**TABLE 1** Summary of extraordinary measures to deal with disasters and emergencies.

## AREA PROFILE

### Mapping gang dynamics in Saldanha Bay

This is the third in a series of articles drawing on the GI-TOC's mapping of gang territories in the Western Cape. Each area profile analyzes the information gathered during the mapping and data-gathering exercise, investigating a particular gang-affected neighbourhood and its place within broader criminal trends in the province. This instalment focuses on the strategic value of Saldanha Bay and Vredenburg to criminal actors, shedding light on vulnerabilities in South Africa's port governance and security model.

Saldanha Bay, home to South Africa's deepest natural harbour and a vital industrial port, is witnessing a surge in gang activity, violence and high-value drug trafficking.<sup>66</sup> The town's geography, infrastructure and comparatively low security profile have made it an emerging target for Cape Flats-based gangs, as well as international organized criminal groups.

These developments are occurring against the backdrop of a growing global cocaine industry. Research on the ground suggests that trafficking syndicates are developing new delivery mechanisms and diversifying distribution methods to maximize the volume of product reaching end markets.<sup>67</sup> Notably, South African criminal groups are playing an increasingly relevant logistical role in this much larger global supply chain.

In the Western Cape, for instance, gangs are reportedly retrieving packages of cocaine from international waters and storing them on behalf of transnational syndicates.<sup>68</sup> Balkan organized criminal networks are known to be facilitating shipments from Brazil through longstanding links to cocaine producers.<sup>69</sup> Most consignments are destined for Australia, China, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates and Europe,<sup>70</sup> but some feed into the domestic drug market.

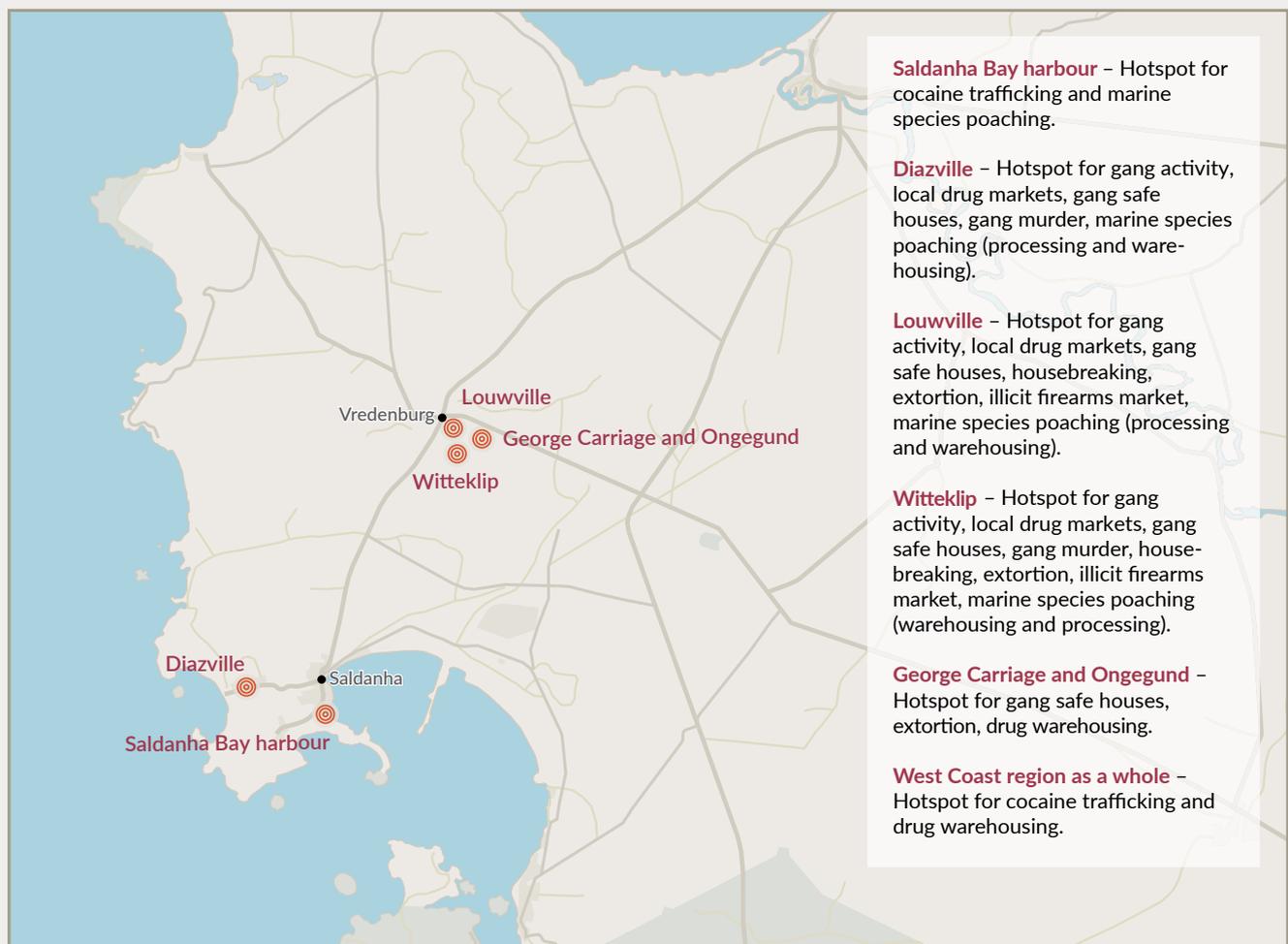


FIGURE 1 Gang-related activity in Saldanha Bay Municipality.

As well as major ports such as Cape Town and Durban, traffickers are increasingly exploiting South Africa's secondary ports, including Saldanha Bay. These less busy locations offer a combination of weaker surveillance, limited policing capacity and easy access to inland distribution routes. The consequences of this shift are most visible in surrounding residential areas. While Saldanha Bay's port economy is centred on the town itself, much of the associated violence occurs inland in neighbouring Vredenburg.<sup>71</sup>

This reflects a global trend in which traffickers establish a presence in secondary ports, resulting in spillover criminal activity in nearby communities.<sup>72</sup> Similar patterns have emerged in Panama, for instance, where organized crime – including Mexican and Colombian cartels – has extensively infiltrated the national port system.<sup>73</sup> Recent investigations indicate that drug trafficking activity has surged in concessioned terminals in the Caribbean region, with Colón now surpassing Panama City as the area with the highest total cocaine seizures.<sup>74</sup>

These international dynamics mirror the developments now unfolding along South Africa's West Coast. Here, however, transnational trafficking routes are intersecting with long-standing gang rivalries, producing a highly volatile criminal landscape.

### GANG-RELATED MURDERS AND ATTEMPTS IN SALDANHA BAY AND VREDENBURG, APRIL 2025 – MARCH 2026



## The flashpoint

In May 2023, Garth Williams, a high-profile figure in the nationally influential 27s Number gang, was shot and killed in Saldanha Bay, allegedly by a prominent 28s member.<sup>86</sup> This marked a turning point in the region's criminal landscape. Williams was widely regarded as a custodian of organized crime on the West Coast, and his death triggered a cycle of retaliatory violence.<sup>87</sup>

According to local law enforcement sources, Williams's murder created a power vacuum linked to the Number gangs. This intensified competition for control of illicit markets, including drugs, firearms and marine poaching.<sup>88</sup> It also led to a spike in gang-related killings across Saldanha Bay, Vredenburg and Paternoster (see the timeline). As one police officer said: 'Now, suddenly, every other weekend we get a murder or attempted murder linked to gang activity.'<sup>89</sup> Although police, gang members and community members confirm the increase in violence, many victims and witnesses are reluctant to report crimes or testify in court, due to a combination of fear and a lack of trust in the authorities.<sup>90</sup>

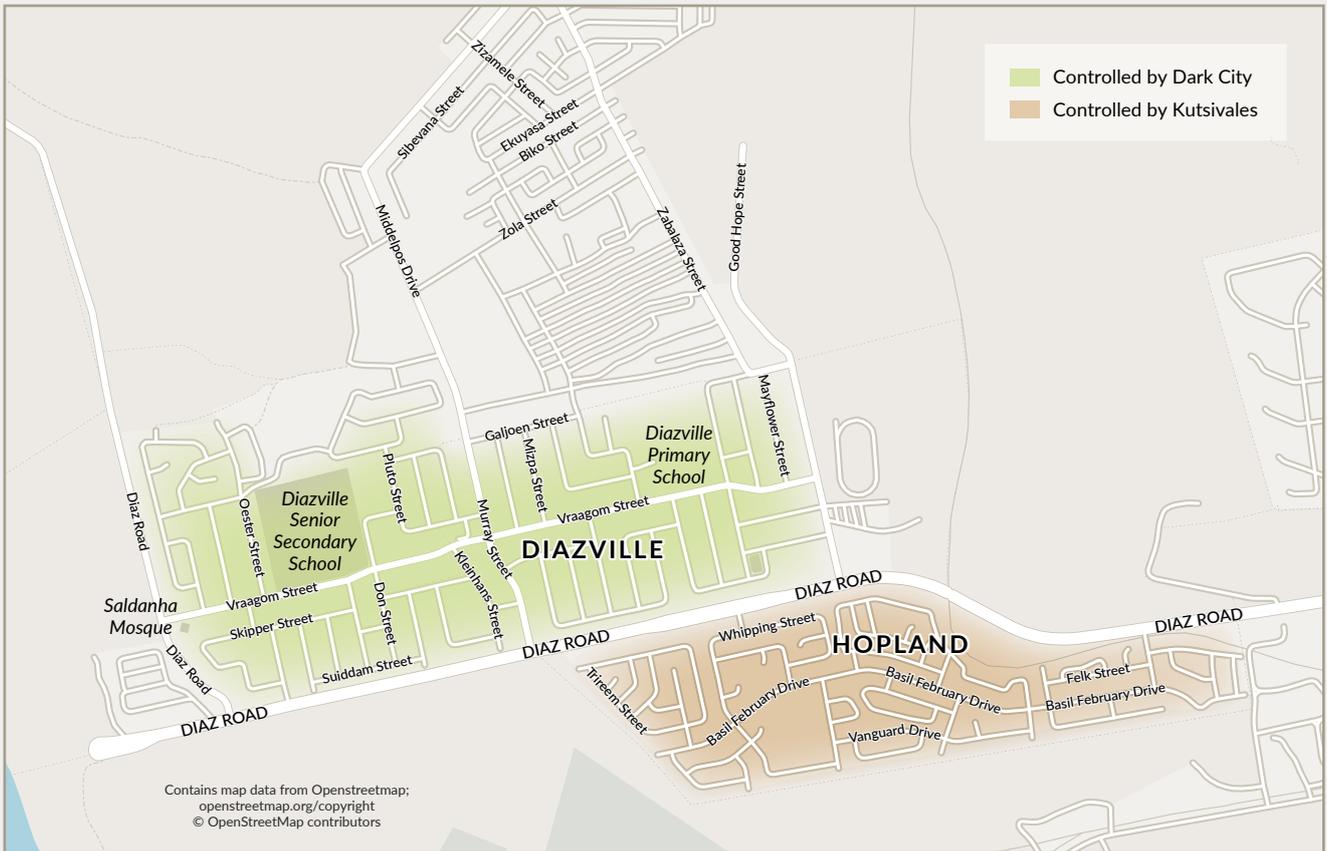
## The Cape and Number gangs extend their influence

Gang control of the illicit economy in Saldanha Bay dates back to the 1990s, when members of The Firm, led by Ernest 'Lastig' Solomon, established links to networks involved in crayfish and abalone poaching.<sup>91</sup> Although Saldanha Bay lies outside the main abalone poaching grounds, which extend from Cape Town to the Southern Cape, it has long served as an important storage and logistics hub for the trade.<sup>92</sup>

The Firm collapsed, amid leadership disputes and fragmentation, in 2005. Today, the area is controlled by two major street gangs: Kutsivales and Dark City,<sup>93</sup> which split from a single body originally involved in poaching operations.<sup>94</sup> Kutsivales operate mainly in Diazville, while Dark City is primarily based in Hopland (see the map). Both groups are involved in cocaine and methamphetamine dealing and continue to participate in poaching. Their rivalry is intense, and clashes over drug selling points and other resources have escalated markedly since 2023.<sup>95</sup>

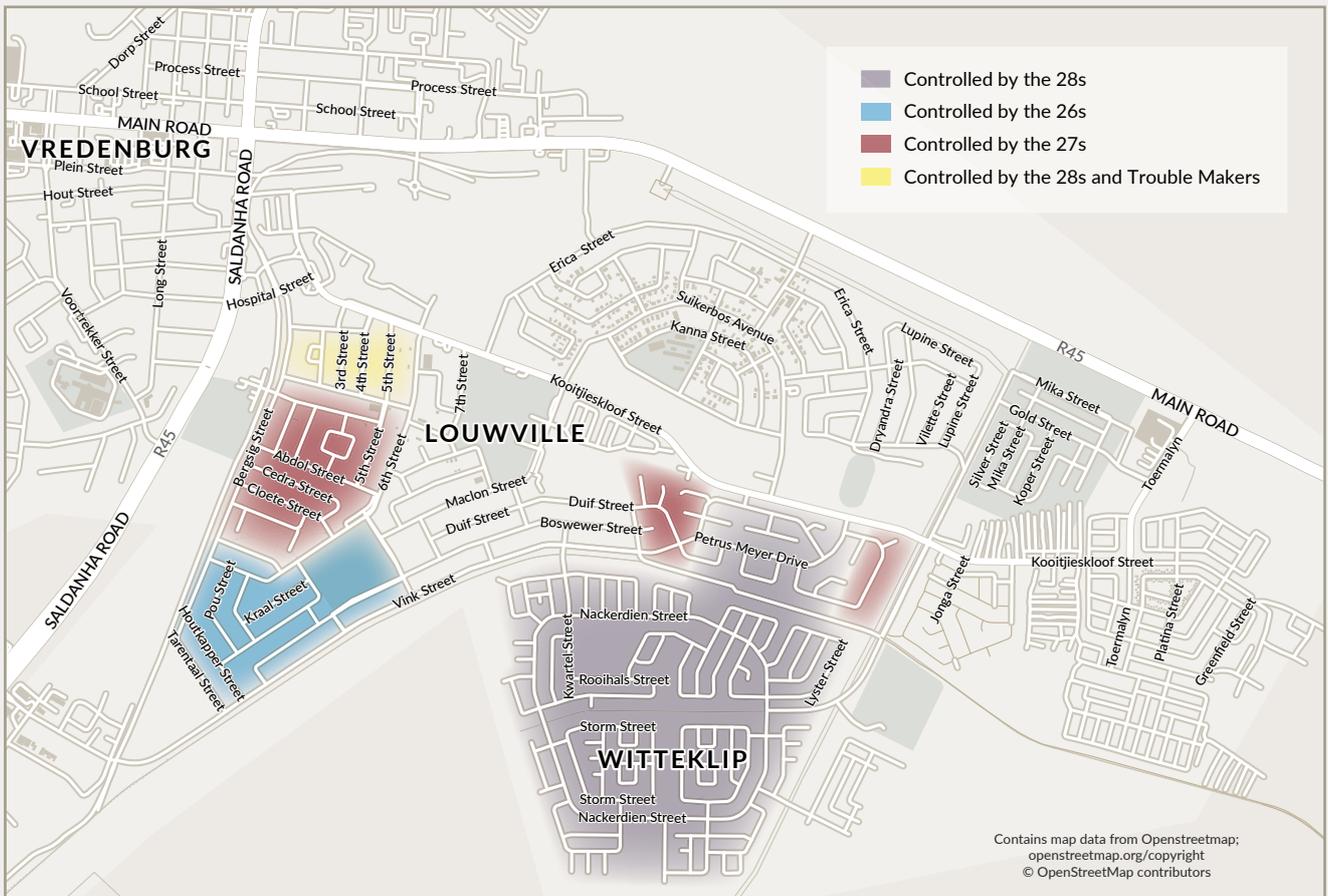
In addition, Cape Town-based gangs are becoming increasingly involved in illicit activity on the West Coast, fuelling concerns that they are expanding their influence to areas far beyond the metropole.<sup>96</sup> Kutsivales and Dark City have reportedly forged links with Cape Flats gangs, representing a significant shift in the regional criminal landscape. These ties first came to light when gang members from the capital were discovered in safehouses in Saldanha Bay.<sup>97</sup> In 2025, for example, members of the Ghetto Kids from Hanover Park, wanted for murder, were found hiding in territory controlled by Kutsivales in Diazville.<sup>98</sup> Street gangs in neighbouring Vredenburg have also provided refuge for wanted Cape Town gang members. Weak coordination and poor intelligence-sharing across SAPS districts enable these groups to evade detection.





**FIGURE 2** Gang turf in Saldanha Bay

Note: Turf boundaries in this region are not clearly defined.



**FIGURE 3** Gang turf in Vredenburg.

Note: Turf boundaries in this region are not clearly defined.

Now, however, it is the prison-based Number gangs – the 26s, 27s and 28s – that are increasingly asserting control over criminal activity across the West Coast, particularly in Vredenburg.<sup>99</sup> Unlike in Cape Town, where violence largely stems from conflicts between rival street gangs, the West Coast is experiencing a hybrid dynamic in which street and prison gangs operate and clash within the same spaces. As a senior 27s figure explained: ‘If you look now, you will see 26, 27 and 28 graffiti all over. So it’s a bit different to Cape Town where you have all of your different local street gangs like the Hard Livings and Americans all over.’<sup>100</sup> This development raises serious concerns, given the Number gangs’ extensive influence and reputation for targeted violence.

### **Gang dynamics on the West Coast**

The situation reflects the broader pattern of prison gangs expanding their influence beyond Cape Town into regional criminal economies, particularly where new illicit markets linked to maritime trafficking are emerging. However, the regional dynamic differs significantly from that typically observed in gang-affected communities on the Cape Flats.<sup>101</sup>

In Cape Town, gang violence is often driven by disputes over territorial control of retail drug markets, with clearly defined boundaries and intense concentrations of conflict within specific neighbourhoods.<sup>102</sup> By contrast, violence along the West Coast is shaped by competition over drug supply routes, firearms trafficking, marine species poaching and stolen goods markets, and typically extends across several towns.<sup>103</sup> Clashes involving criminal actors operating in Saldanha Bay may spill over into neighbouring Vredenburg or Paternoster, and vice versa.<sup>104</sup>

This has given rise to two distinct tiers of violence.<sup>105</sup> The first involves disputes over neighbourhood drug turf and other criminal opportunities, usually linked to local street gangs such as Kutsivales and Dark City. The second comprises targeted assassinations connected to broader rivalries over supply chains. These are reportedly often coordinated from prison by senior figures affiliated with the Number gangs, and carried out by affiliated actors.<sup>106</sup> This level of organized, targeted violence indicates the extent to which these groups are engaging in the high-stakes criminal activity emerging along the West Coast.

### **Saldanha’s strategic criminal value**

Historically, drug-enforcement operations in South Africa have focused on the major ports of Durban and Cape Town, the country’s key hubs for heroin and cocaine trafficking.<sup>107</sup> Saldanha Bay, however, is increasingly serving as an alternative entry point for transnational trafficking networks.<sup>108</sup> The town was the site of one of the country’s largest-ever drug seizures in 2021, when police confiscated cocaine with an estimated value of R583 million from a fishing vessel.<sup>109</sup>

Interviews with port and law enforcement officials, as well as gang figures, indicate that there are several factors that make Saldanha Bay and the surrounding area attractive to organized criminal groups.<sup>110</sup> These include limited policing resources relative to major urban hubs, comparatively weak security infrastructure, and the port’s location, which is outside the purview of the Cape Town authorities.<sup>111</sup> The 27s and 28s now play a significant role in the cocaine economy in both Saldanha Bay and Vredenburg.<sup>112</sup> As one member of the 27s put it: ‘There are fewer eyes on you when you move outside the city.’<sup>113</sup>

Recent drug-related arrests in the Saldanha Bay area indicate that cocaine now dominates the local market, accounting for around 90% of cases.<sup>114</sup> This situation reflects a broader South African trend highlighted by the Global Organized Crime Index, which has observed consistent growth in the country’s illicit cocaine market since 2019.<sup>115</sup>

Reports of sizeable quantities of cocaine washing up along the coastline have strengthened suspicions that international trafficking networks are dropping consignments off Saldanha Bay in watertight packaging from container vessels travelling between South America and Asia.<sup>116</sup> These packages are retrieved offshore by local skippers with alleged gang connections, before being stored in local stash houses alongside firearms and illicit cash. The drugs are then transported in batches to larger urban markets where demand is higher.<sup>117</sup>

Planned infrastructure expansion may serve to increase Saldanha’s vulnerabilities. In May 2025, the government announced plans to build commercial shipping terminals within the Freeport Saldanha Industrial Development Zone.<sup>118</sup> Although aimed at attracting investment, such developments could also create opportunities for criminal networks seeking to exploit South Africa’s secondary ports and maritime trade routes for contraband.

The current risk is not that Saldanha Bay will replace the major ports as South Africa’s primary maritime drug hub, but rather that it may become an established node within a diversified trafficking system. This would have direct consequences for community safety, the local economy and public health. Policymakers should therefore treat secondary ports and adjacent areas as part of routine threat assessments that consider these emerging dynamics.

To address these risks, maritime and terminal surveillance must be paired with intelligence-led local policing, rapid follow-up investigations and community-level interventions that reduce the gang recruitment and the market incentives that sustain local distribution networks. Furthermore, to prevent the further entrenchment of illicit markets along the Cape West Coast, law enforcement agencies must prioritize targeted operations against high-level gang leadership.

## 'Klipgooiers': stone-throwing as a gang recruitment pathway

The phenomenon of 'klipgooiery' (stone-throwing), in which groups of children in gang-affected Cape Flats areas throw stones at each other in the street and from rooftops, has become an important indicator of local gang influence. The patterns and contexts of this activity provide valuable insights into broader dynamics within these communities.

Stone-throwing clashes involving rival gangs have broken out recently in Hanover Park, including between the Laughing Boys and the Ghetto Kids and between the Laughing Boys and the Americans,<sup>119</sup> and in Manenberg, between the Hard Livings and the Americans.<sup>120</sup> Although these incidents are often dismissed as minor and isolated events, they can form part of broader territorial conflicts.<sup>121</sup>

Stone-throwing across turf boundaries can trigger cycles of retaliation and lead to an escalation of violence, including shootings.<sup>122</sup> Participating is also a point of entry for children into street gangs. As a junior captain from the Laughing Boys confirmed: 'They work for us ... they are our *klipgooiertjies* [little stone throwers].'<sup>123</sup>

### Stone-throwing as a rite of passage

*Klipgooiery* first emerged as a means of political protest in the 1970s,<sup>124</sup> but became a factor in gang recruitment in the late 2000s. Gang leaders are said to identify children with proven throwing accuracy, viewing it as a proxy for shooting proficiency.<sup>125</sup> Territorial stone-throwing also functions as a demonstration of loyalty or courage. In neighbourhoods where gang identity shapes everyday life, some young people see it as a rite of passage. Gang leaders, meanwhile, interpret this youth involvement as a sign of readiness for deeper integration and more serious forms of violence.<sup>126</sup> The most effective throwers are then indoctrinated and provided with knives or guns.<sup>127</sup>

Studies and media reports have described the practice of stone-throwing among schoolchildren in the Cape Flats and parts of the Eastern Cape as a 'youth subculture'. In this context, the activity is used to teach children about group loyalty, retaliation against rivals for disrespect or harm, and the use of violence to establish authority – the norms and codes of gang culture.<sup>128</sup>

Brigadier Jayce Naidoo, the commander of the Manenberg police station, has stated that stone-throwing between children is used as a gang recruitment mechanism, resulting in 'serious and violent clashes'. He said that the activity was 'orchestrated by larger gang groupings as a part of territorial status', and that adults 'fuelled the behaviour', even acting as lookouts for the perpetrators.<sup>129</sup>

### A tripwire for larger gang conflicts

Beyond recruitment, seemingly minor incidents of stone-throwing can trigger larger-scale gang conflicts. This potential for escalation was widely reported during community research. A community activist from Mitchells Plain described how a broken window or someone being hit by a stone could lead to an exchange of gunfire.<sup>130</sup> According to a junior leader in the Laughing Boys, stone-throwing in Hanover Park could 'easily start a gang war'.<sup>131</sup>

Stone-throwing has often preceded lethal shootings. In Manenberg, a woman was shot and killed in November 2024 while calling her son away from a stone-throwing clash,<sup>132</sup> and in January 2026, a bystander was fatally shot during a stone-throwing battle allegedly orchestrated by rival gangs the Fancy Boys and Hard Livings.<sup>133</sup> With incidents allegedly occurring daily, and starting as early as 6 a.m., police launched a crackdown in the suburb, leading to the arrest of 17 suspects, including an eight-year-old boy.<sup>134</sup>

In Manenberg, Hanover Park, Mitchells Plain and Lavender Hill – the areas in which the highest number of stone-throwing incidents are recorded – the activity typically follows a specific sequence:<sup>135</sup>

- Children throw stones at each other across territorial boundaries;
- Property is damaged or people are injured;
- Allegations circulate about who initiated the incident;
- Older adolescents or gang-aligned adults intervene;
- Retaliation follows, sometimes involving firearms.

The layout of some neighbourhoods can also shape how confrontations unfold. The apartheid-era spatial planning of Manenberg, Hanover Park, Lavender Hill and parts of Mitchells Plain has concentrated communities in two- and three-storey blocks of flats separated by alleyways.<sup>136</sup> These narrow passages often mark the territorial boundaries of rival gangs and provide a space for children to gather and evade their opponents.<sup>137</sup> This type of confrontation is less prevalent in Bonteheuwel, for instance, as the terrain is less conducive to it.<sup>138</sup>

### Implications for monitoring

Interview data from several Cape Flats communities indicates that stone-throwing incidents should not automatically be dismissed as inconsequential altercations between children. In certain contexts, the activity operates as an early sign of conflict within broader gang dynamics. From a community safety perspective, therefore, it warrants closer attention, particularly in areas of ongoing territorial tension or recent violence.

In neighbourhoods characterized by narrow alleyways and other features of apartheid-era spatial planning, where provocation and retreat can occur swiftly, incidents are more likely to escalate. More consistent recording of *klipgooi* activity could help to detect rising tensions and identify emerging patterns of violence, particularly in areas where rival territories are close together.

However, it is important to distinguish early on between routine youth altercations and gang-related cross-boundary stone-throwing. What is required is a coherent community strategy that combines hotspot policing, rapid investigations and credible intelligence, alongside the targeted disruption of local networks and sustained prevention initiatives focused on young people. Responses that focus on outbreaks of violence after the event, while leaving the underlying causes intact, are unlikely to bring about a change in the current dynamics.

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