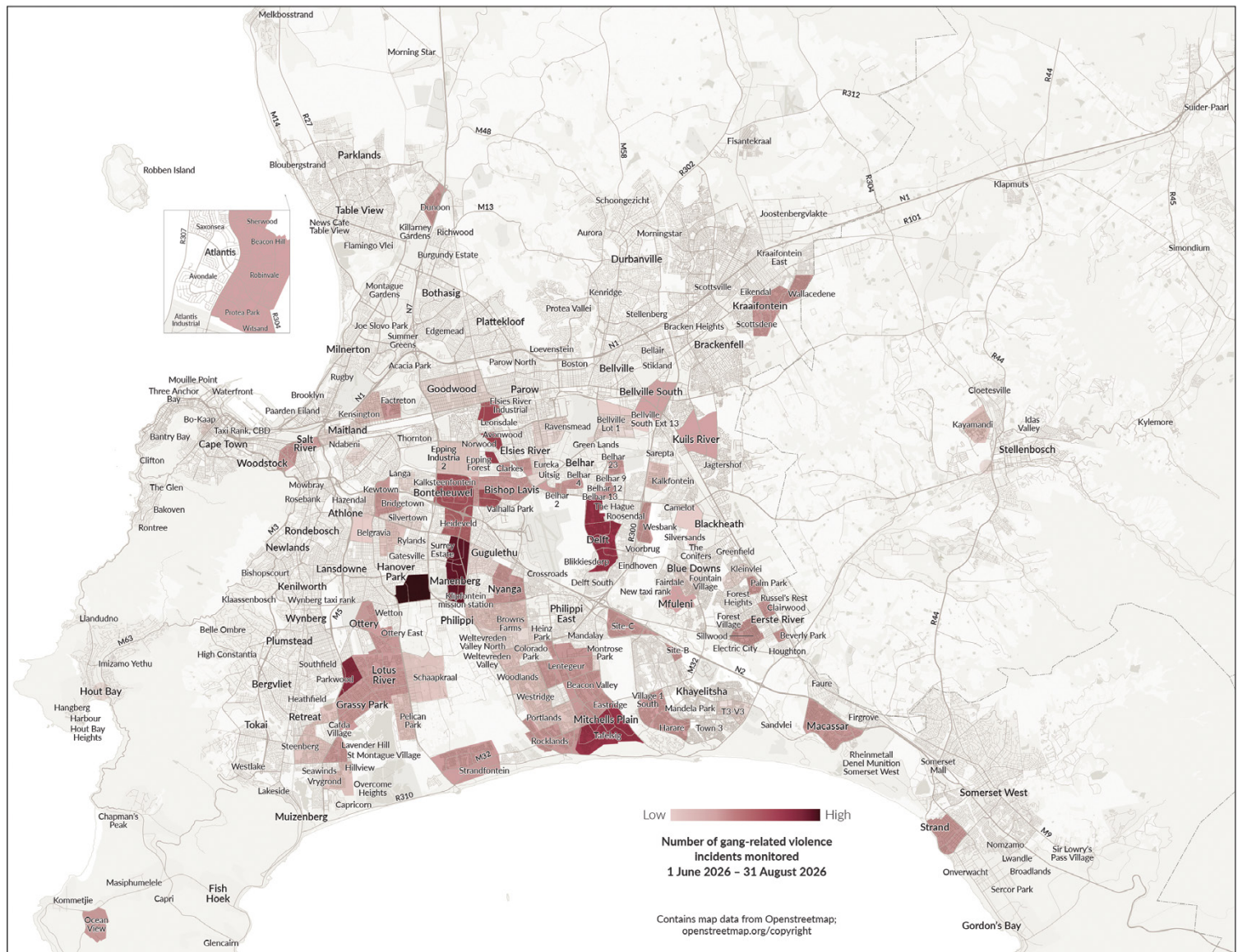




WESTERN CAPE GANG MONITOR



IN THIS ISSUE

This issue traces four developments in the Western Cape's gang landscape over the past quarter:

- How the impact of the military deployment Operation Prosper has been perceived by communities and gang members.
- Ways in which gang leaders continue to influence illicit operations while incarcerated, and insights into the prison contraband market.

- A case study of Malmesbury, examining factors behind why gangs expand to outlying towns.
- A recent trial concerning the state supply of guns to gangs sees convicted former police colonel Christiaan Prinsloo giving evidence.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This is the 10th 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

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.

Hotspots of gang violence

During the monitoring period, hotspots of gang violence (see map above) in the Western Cape were driven by skirmishes over turf and illicit markets as the broader landscape becomes increasingly contested and volatile.

In Hanover Park, gang fragmentation continues to drive outbreaks of violence. The main cause of violence during the reporting period has been the war between the Ghetto Kids and the Only the Family gang (a breakaway of the Ghetto Kids), which continues to escalate.¹ It is alleged that the Laughing Boys and Mongrels were also drawn into the conflict, with members of the Laughing Boys allegedly defecting to Only the Family, while some joined the Ghetto Kids. Some members of the Mongrels,

meanwhile, are said to have joined the Ghetto Kids, increasing tensions within the Mongrels camp.²

In Parkwood, the Young Gifted Six Bobs have withdrawn from the area, shifting their focus to Pelican Park, resulting in the Americans and Mongrels fighting over the newly available turf.³ Meanwhile, the Fancy Boys continue their expansion campaign, fighting with the Americans in Tafelsig and the Inglourious Basterds in Manenberg.⁴ The Fancy Boys are engaged in a conflict with the 28s in Delft, while the Terrible Josters and Dixie Boys also compete for turf in addition to the Junky Funky Kids and Bavarians fighting each other in the area.

Shifting perceptions of military intervention on the Cape Flats

For much of 2025, civil society organizations and residents of the Cape Flats had called for the army to be deployed due to a surge in deadly gang violence and turf wars, with some demanding that a state of disaster be declared.⁵ It was against this backdrop that President Cyril Ramaphosa directed the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to assist the police in combating gang violence.⁶ On 1 April 2026, SANDF convoys began rolling into gang hotspots to conduct joint patrols and searches alongside the police.⁷

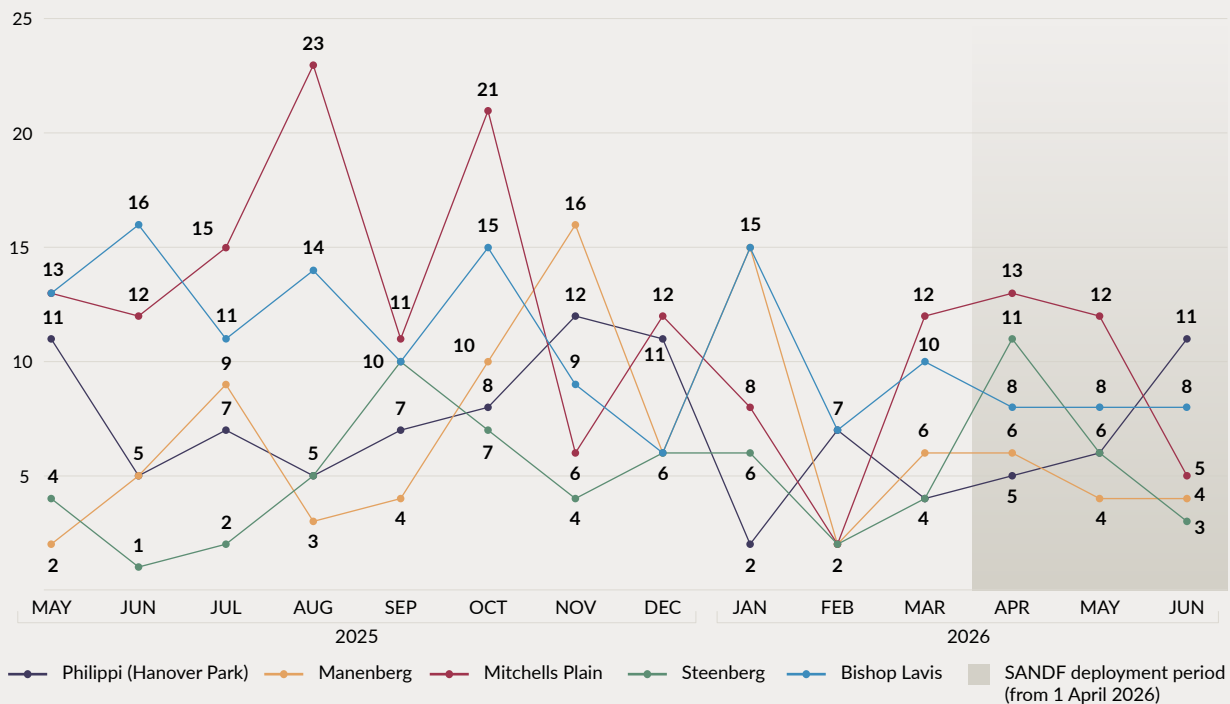
The intervention, Operation Prosper, was broadly welcomed by residents, who hoped soldiers would bring relief from the shootings that had long plagued their communities.⁸ Six months later, however, this hope has given way to frustration. Residents, activists, law enforcement officials and gang members say Prosper has done little to curb gang activity and violence.⁹

Meanwhile, South African Police Service (SAPS) murder statistics for the first three months of the deployment show that results in some of the worst-affected gang precincts were mixed.¹⁰ As the SAPS does not publicly disaggregate gang-related murders at station level, total murder figures for gang-affected precincts

serve as a proxy. While not every murder is gang-related, these figures still provide a useful indication of levels of violence and how they have shifted over time.

The murder rates in five policing precincts with a high concentration of gangs, high historical levels of violence, and now the presence of the SANDF under Operation Prosper, illustrate the fluctuations that make short-term assessments challenging (see Figure 1). Trends in other precincts were also examined and showed broadly similar patterns, with fluctuations and no consistent or sustained decline in incidents following the SANDF deployment. This is due to the fluid and unpredictable nature of gang violence, which is frequently driven by leadership disputes, turf wars and retaliatory cycles that produce periods of calm followed by sudden outbreaks of violence.¹¹

The Philippi precinct, which covers the Hanover Park area, experienced three consecutive monthly increases in murders, rising from four incidents in March to 11 in June 2026. Mitchells Plain and Steenberg, where murders increased between March and April, recorded decreases in May and June. Murders were relatively stable in Bishop Lavis and Manenberg.



What the graph tells us

- Reductions predate deployment: Declines in incidents were already evident in several precincts before April 2026, suggesting that the post-deployment reductions may reflect existing fluctuations rather than being a direct effect of the military intervention.
- Mixed results: Between April and June 2026, incidents declined in Mitchells Plain and Steenberg, remained unchanged in Bishop Lavis and largely unchanged in Manenberg, but increased in Philippi (Hanover Park).

What it does not tell us

- Causality: The data cannot establish whether the SANDF deployment caused the observed changes. Other policing interventions and broader criminal dynamics may have influenced the results.
- Displacement: It cannot determine whether violence was displaced to neighbouring areas rather than prevented.
- Sustained impact: Three months of post-deployment data is insufficient to demonstrate a sustained reduction in violence, or evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

FIGURE 1 Monthly murders in five Cape Flats police precincts, May 2025–June 2026.

Note: The figures are compiled from the SAPS quarterly crime statistics.

Source: SAPS crime statistics. See <https://www.saps.gov.za/services/crimestats.php>

Overall, these statistics are insufficient to assess the impact of Operation Prosper with confidence. At this stage, the data can indicate emerging trends, but not establish whether observed changes are sustained or attributable to the deployment.

In some ways, the statistics justify the frustrations of residents, who had hoped for a more visible short-term impact. However, gangsterism and associated violence cannot be addressed through enforcement operations alone. The criminal networks, corruption, money flows and supply chains that sustain gangs must be systematically targeted and dismantled through intelligence-led policing to achieve meaningful, enduring results.¹²

Community perceptions: ‘We welcomed the army’

Interviewees said they had been optimistic about Operation Prosper. ‘When the president announced that he would send the army here to the Cape Flats, many of us here were happy,’ said an activist in Hanover Park.¹³ Similar sentiments were shared

by community members in Mitchells Plain and other gang-affected areas.¹⁴

This support was largely driven by demands for the state to re-establish its legitimacy and authority,¹⁵ even though previous military deployments had not achieved the desired impact.¹⁶ As one Hanover Park community activist put it, ‘Because of all the blood on these streets, we welcomed the army, [although we knew that] when they were sent here during the COVID-19 lockdown they did nothing for these communities.’¹⁷

This optimism would suggest a sense of desperation among communities to see an end to gang violence and the entrenchment of gang influence and criminal governance. Today, however, community members are frustrated with Operation Prosper, saying the deployment is not having any significant effect on gang activity and violence.¹⁸ ‘Now, when the army was sent, again nothing changed. The gangsters kept shooting.’¹⁹

A recurring complaint is that the army is largely absent from the areas where it is needed most. 'They [the army and police] are nowhere to be seen. The people requested that the army come in. ... They say they are around, but we hardly see them,' said a resident of Hanover Park.²⁰ Where soldiers have been present, residents said the patrols do little more than pass through their areas, leaving gang violence to flare up once they have left.²¹

Statistics released by the SAPS and SANDF counter such claims.²² They show that during the first three months of the operation,

crime prevention and enforcement activities were conducted in 17 'high-crime' precincts, resulting in 1 054 arrests for crimes, including murder, attempted murder, illegal possession of firearms and ammunition, and drug-related offences.²³ However, although such efforts are commendable, reliance on the number of arrests and seizures as a primary metric for operational success may misrepresent the impact of counter-organized crime interventions, especially if most of the arrests involve low-level gang members and drug users.

PREVIOUS ARMY DEPLOYMENTS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

In 2008, the army was ordered to help restore order during a surge in xenophobic violence. In 2012, it was deployed to disarm armed striking mineworkers and restore stability to the Rustenburg platinum belt.

In 2015, under Operation Fiela, the SANDF was deployed amid high levels of xenophobic violence to assist the SAPS and other state agencies in targeting criminal activities. These included illegal firearms, drug dens, human trafficking, prostitution rings, counterfeit goods, hijacked buildings and cases of business regulatory non-compliance.²⁴ Later, in January 2018, Operation Fiela II had an expanded mandate to permanently shut down crime hotspots.²⁵

Ramaphosa announced Operation Prosper in 2019, ordering the SANDF to support the police in combating gang activity and illegal mining, and in securing national key points, such as power stations.²⁶

In each of the interventions designed to target gangs, however, control could not be sustained. Levels of violence initially dipped but rose again as gangs adapted, and because their networks, money flows and supply chains remained intact.²⁷

In July 2026, Acting Minister of Police Firoz Cachalia indicated that phase two of Operation Prosper would prioritize intelligence-led policing of gang leaders, financiers and firearm suppliers.²⁸

Community members emphasized how gang violence is often highly concentrated in specific streets and blocks. Deterrence therefore requires sustained, predictable pressure in those high-incident locations. According to members of a neighbourhood watch in the Grassy Park precinct, this is where the deployment falls short: 'The problem is that they [the army] don't stay in an area for an extended period.'²⁹ Similar sentiments were shared by a senior law enforcement official, who pointed to a lack of coordination and information sharing between the SANDF and the SAPS when it came to conducting strategic operations, including patrols, in gang hotspots.³⁰

Gang perspectives: 'The army can't do anything'

Before the deployment, gang members said they had not been concerned that the army would disrupt their operations. 'The army can't do anything. SAPS doesn't even know what is going on. We don't even move our stuff [drugs and guns] out of the area,' said a gang member in Grassy Park.³¹ A gang boss in Mitchells Plain said: 'Does it interrupt my business when they are here? No.'³²

Criminal activities have continued in the gang landscape during the deployment, including drug sales, extortion and violent contestation over turf.³³ As a former gang member put it, 'In Mitchells Plain, Bonteheuwel, Heideveld, Hanover Park, Lavender Hill – in all these areas – the gangs are still shooting and killing each other.'³⁴

In Hanover Park, for example, major outbreaks of gang violence have been recorded,³⁵ with long-established gangs such as the Americans, Mongrels, Laughing Boys and Ghetto Kids clashing over turf.³⁶ Tensions in the area are also exacerbated by break-away gangs as they compete for territory.³⁷ In August, the Only The Family gang, a splinter group of the Ghetto Kids, launched attacks against the Americans.³⁸ The conflict led to the assassination of Nizaam 'Zaam' Marcus, a senior Americans member, who was shot in Wynberg in August.³⁹ Marcus allegedly supervised illicit operations in an area of Hanover Park known as 'The Plenty'.⁴⁰ Americans leaders have since indicated that fighting between the two rival gangs is likely to escalate, regardless of the SANDF presence.⁴¹

Gang leaders have sought to exploit community grievances against the army, positioning themselves as protectors and providers.⁴² According to a senior gang member in Mitchells Plain, 'You know what the army does? They come here and they randomly search all these *laaities* [youngsters] and they beat the people up for nothing! *Hulle hou baie van afknou* [they like to bully].'⁴³

Allegations of SANDF members assaulting the public have been reported,⁴⁴ and such incidents alienate community members, perpetuating mistrust of the state. As a gang member said, 'It is the gang that looks after the community, not the state.'⁴⁵ This narrative was echoed by a gang boss in Mitchells Plain, who claimed to spend R10 000 a week providing residents with food, electricity and medicine.⁴⁶

Gang members have leveraged such claims of 'charity' to secure the community's loyalty and buy their silence, and they point to a concerning dynamic: where the army is perceived as ineffective, and even abusive, gangs may be able to present themselves as a more reliable source of security and support than the state. This undermines the state's authority in communities the deployment was intended to protect, strengthening parallel criminal governance.

What next for Operation Prosper?

While extraordinary measures are sometimes required to reduce gang violence, Prosper has left community members frustrated. Many of those who had welcomed the army now view the intervention as ineffective. Meanwhile, gangs continue to operate with little regard for the soldiers in their midst.

The military cannot be expected to substitute for specialized civilian policing, nor is it mandated to. Its value lies in acting as a stabilizing force, securing violent and high-risk areas, and creating the operational space needed for the police to investigate and dismantle gangs. Strategic cooperation between the two agencies is essential.

To improve the operation's impact, intelligence sharing and coordination between the SAPS and the SANDF must be prioritized. Micro hotspots of gang activity and violence must be identified, and both agencies must maintain visibility there to prevent violence.

Targeted, intelligence-led operations against key gang figures and gang infrastructure must be put in place to ensure that these individuals and the contraband they traffic, including firearms and drugs, are removed from the streets. Thorough investigations are also needed to ensure the successful prosecution of orchestrators and perpetrators of violence, and facilitators of illicit markets.

The effectiveness of the deployment must also be evaluated over a longer period using more meaningful indicators than arrest figures. The impact of any such operation should be measured by sustained reductions in gang-related murders, the disruption of firearm and drug supply chains, and the successful prosecution of powerful gang figures. These are the factors that will assist in dismantling gangs and reducing their influence in society.

Command from the cell: Prisons as operational bases for organized crime

In September 2026, the National Commissioner of Correctional Services, Makgothi Thobakgale, told the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System (the Madlanga Commission) that South Africa's prisons had become operational bases for organized crime.⁴⁷ Members of prison and street gangs were noted to be colluding to sustain illicit operations.⁴⁸

Thobakgale said that even though cell phones were prohibited in correctional facilities, devices were being used by incarcerated offenders 'to direct criminal operations, coordinate drug distribution, orchestrate the intimidation or assassination of witnesses and officials, and facilitate fraud against members of the public'.⁴⁹

When gang members and leaders enter the prison system, their activities 'are extended to the correctional setting to the extent of smuggling and selling drugs [and], to some extent, eliminating people or witnesses ... even when they are still inside ... through communication mechanisms that they smuggle inside,' the commissioner said.⁵⁰

Furthermore, prisons are not only command posts for external gang markets: they would also appear to be captive marketplaces in their own right, with drugs and weapons traded in an internal economy that remains largely hidden from public view.

The power of the cell phone signal

In May 2026, the Minister of Correctional Services, Pieter Groenewald, said 1 010 cell phones had been seized in Western Cape prisons as part of the 2025/26 iteration of Operation Vala, the festive season prison security crackdown that has happened annually since 2005.⁵¹ Thobakgale had announced in February that nationwide Operation Vala seizures included 8 063 cell phones.⁵²

These smuggled devices are used by incarcerated gang leaders to communicate and coordinate with their gangs,⁵³ and the effects of this are visible on the street, as revealed by gang members in several communities. They indicated that many illicit operations – including territorial wars, assassinations and the micro dynamics of illicit markets – are influenced by senior incarcerated gang members.⁵⁴ 'I just make a quick call [to imprisoned gang leaders] ... I tell them what's happening here in the area and who's trying to deal in our turf, and we come up with a plan together to sort it out,' said a drug dealer for a gang in Hanover Park.⁵⁵

Incarcerated gang members' influence over the drug trade is particularly pronounced. In Saldanha Bay, for example, prison gangs are said to use their external network to take advantage of the growing global cocaine trade by allegedly forging relationships with Colombian cartel members.⁵⁶ This is fuelling an increase in cocaine dealing,⁵⁷ highlighting incarcerated gang leaders' influence over the criminal landscape.

Imprisoned members have also orchestrated assassinations through their pool of foot soldiers and hitmen on the outside.⁵⁸ Cell phone numbers associated with George 'Geweld' Thomas, a high-ranking member of the 28s who was sentenced in 2015 to seven life terms,⁵⁹ were reportedly used to make thousands of phone calls while he was awaiting trial. In his Madlanga Commission testimony, Thobakgale described Thomas – who is still incarcerated – as 'the number one gang leader in South Africa, popularly known as "the Lord"'.⁶⁰

THE NUMBER GANGS

South Africa's prison gang system is dominated by the Number gangs – the 26s, 27s and 28s. Operating through highly structured councils, these syndicates are anchored in a 19th-century story of a wise man and two groups of bandits who established a criminal organization to fight colonial exploitation.⁶¹ For many prisoners, the Number provides an identity, a framework for masculinity and a code to govern thoughts and actions.⁶²

In the past, the Number culture maintained a strict firewall between prison and street operations, and entering the prison

system required abandoning all street gang ranks. However, this separation has fractured.⁶³ Driven by the lucrative 1980s drug trade, wealthy street-gang bosses began purchasing rank within the Number upon imprisonment. This dissolved the historical boundaries between street and prison ecosystems.⁶⁴

Prison and street gangs now cooperate,⁶⁵ and in some cases Number gangs have formed their own street components, such as the 27s under the late William 'Red' Stevens and the 28s, allegedly under the leadership of Ralph Stanfield.

According to media reporting, a 2022 court judgment identified Thomas as being responsible for orchestrating a murder from prison. The victim, who was also in prison, was released after a gang member connected to Thomas paid his bail. He was killed shortly afterwards at a shebeen.⁶⁶ Thomas was never charged for this murder.

Witnesses in gang cases have also been targeted.⁶⁷ For example, during the trial of Yanga 'Bara' Nyalara, an alleged extortion kingpin operating in Khayelitsha,⁶⁸ two of the three state witnesses were killed and the third allegedly survived two assassination attempts, contributing to the collapse of the case and Nyalara's release.⁶⁹

There are also cases of extortion activities being coordinated from behind bars, one example being the case of a road construction contractor who allegedly received a call from a gang member in Pollsmoor prison demanding that he abandon a project in Bishop Lavis because the site belonged to the gang member. This incident received widespread attention after the mayor of Cape Town, Geordin Hill-Lewis, said extortion syndicates were operating from Pollsmoor and called for the introduction of signal jammers at the prison.⁷⁰

SIGNAL JAMMERS IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

The implementation of cell phone signal jammers was considered by the Department of Correctional Services, and in 2024 Groenewald asked National Treasury to fund the project.⁷¹ In February 2025, Thobakgale informed Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services that the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa had said the department did not have the authority to make such a request because it was no longer part of the security cluster of government departments.⁷² In August 2026, Groenewald's office said legislative and regulatory hurdles had limited the viability of jammers, resulting in the department shifting its strategy to focus on the detection of cell phones and other contraband.⁷³

All aboard the prison train

The movement of people between the street and prison facilitates a flow of contraband, and tactical information.⁷⁴

A Pollsmoor warder described the phenomenon of 'intentional incarceration', whereby gang members deliberately get themselves arrested so they can connect with incarcerated gang members and leaders.⁷⁵ While not all cases of incarceration are intentional, such exchanges form part of a practice that is rooted in the Number's mythology and which pre-dates the age of cell phones, serving as a conduit between the external underworld and the prison ecosystem.⁷⁶

Gang members refer to this flow as *stimela* (literally, a 'train' that shuttles people between prison and the outside).⁷⁷ The phenomenon is allegedly often used when individuals are summoned to meetings with senior leadership in prison to discuss matters such as governance within gangs, or operational strategies, including the targeting of rival figures, or tactics around establishing new drug and firearm supply lines.⁷⁸

This movement of gang members also facilitates the movement of contraband into prisons.⁷⁹ The correctional system has been described as having its own economy, characterized by flows of drugs, weapons and money.⁸⁰ According to a member of the 27s gang, 'The prison is like a fruit-and-veg market. Everyone is part of that *smokkelary* [smuggling routine].'

The drug market inside prison is particularly lucrative, with prices higher than are paid for the equivalent on the street. 'Mandrax [methaqualone] can cost R30 on the street, but that button [tablet] will cost R100 in prison,' said one gang member.⁸¹ Meanwhile, ecstasy and methamphetamine are also said to be sold at more than double the street price in prison.⁸²

The prospect of larger profit margins per deal has resulted in an influx of drugs into prisons, where there is an internal captive

market. Incarcerated gang leaders arrange with their members on the outside to smuggle in drugs with the assistance of prison warders.⁸³ The cash reserves gang leaders accumulate from the sale of drugs can be used to buy the support of other prisoners and bribe warders.

All gang members interviewed indicated that smuggling into prisons is accomplished with the collusion of warders.⁸⁴ 'There's a constant exchange of money between the prisoner population and the prison warders or prison administration ... Those *mense* [people] will easily open doors that should not be opened – if you pay them money,' said a member of the 27s gang.⁸⁵ These sentiments were echoed by Thobakgale, who told the Madlanga Commission in September 2026 that 137 correctional officials were implicated in helping to smuggle contraband during the 2025/26 financial year and were subjected to disciplinary processes.⁸⁶ In August 2026, a warder was arrested at Goodwood prison after he was found in possession of 600 Mandrax tablets, 100 grams of *tik* and 300 grams of *dagga* (cannabis).⁸⁷

Can South Africa learn from Italy's prison reforms?

Incarcerating gang leaders will have limited disruptive effects if they continue directing criminal activity from inside and profiting from trafficking drugs to the prison market. Policy reforms that mitigate the risk of organized criminal activities being controlled from prisons should therefore be considered.

Lessons can be learned from other countries that have implemented such reforms.⁸⁸ Italy, for example, introduced a specialized detention framework for incarcerated mafia leaders. The country enacted a law authorizing the minister of justice to isolate such inmates in a separate facility, restrict their visits, correspondence and contact with other inmates, and allow judicially authorized monitoring and recording of visits.⁸⁹

South Africa, by contrast, detains inmates in standard correctional facilities,⁹⁰ and their effectiveness largely depends on the officials tasked with preventing cell phones, cash, drugs and other prohibited items from entering prisons.

However, any reform to prison policy must be bolstered by intensified screening and search operations to detect the smuggling of contraband into prisons. Investigations into allegations of corruption and collusion with gangs by prison warders must be prioritized and, where appropriate and justified, there should be lifestyle audits of correctional service officials.

Previous research has recommended that police target gang leaders through intelligence-led operations and investigations that result in successful prosecutions.⁹¹ However, these efforts will come to nought if gang leaders are able to continue directing their operations from behind bars.⁹² The need for a new approach can hardly be overstated.

Malmesbury: A peri-urban frontier of gang expansion in the Western Cape

For several years, Malmesbury, an agricultural town in the Western Cape's Swartland region, has experienced a rapid influx of gangs, either displaced from Cape Town or attracted by the growth of the drug market and other illicit economic opportunities. As these groups have become more established, they have expanded their influence within local communities and recruited young people, including children, into their ranks.

The consequences of this expansion have become increasingly visible in recent months. A cycle of retaliatory violence began in June this year, after Ralph 'Frog' Philander, a senior Mongrels figure,⁹³ killed a young member of the Americans in a housing development known as Die Wit Flats.⁹⁴

The Americans retaliated by sending hitmen from Cape Town to the area in June,⁹⁵ and Philander was killed outside his home.⁹⁶ This culminated in a mass shooting in July that left eight people injured, including a one-year-old child who was shot in the face, and two dead.⁹⁷

The situation unfolding in Malmesbury reflects a trend that has featured elsewhere in our recent monitoring: the expansion of gang activity beyond the Cape Flats and into smaller towns. While gangs have long maintained a presence in rural and peri-urban areas, their influence is growing, and the violence associated with their operations is becoming more pronounced as competition over territory intensifies and criminal governance begins to take hold.⁹⁸

WHY GANGS EXPAND TO OUTLYING AREAS

The expansion of gangs into smaller towns is not a new phenomenon. Interviews conducted with gang members over the past two decades suggest that outlying areas have long been viewed as attractive locations for criminal activity.

The Terrible Josters, for instance, expanded into small towns and fishing villages along the southern Cape coast between 2003 and 2005 to control abalone poaching operations. From there, the product was traded with Chinese organized criminal groups in exchange for drug precursor chemicals used to produce *tik* and Mandrax.⁹⁹

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, senior figures linked to the Terrible Josters and the Sexy Boys reportedly began buying up land in quiet towns and rural areas to establish Mandrax laboratories.¹⁰⁰ Between 2015 and 2018, gangs such as the 28s, Terrible Josters and Americans were also reported to be extending their operations into areas such as Saldanha Bay, Mamre and Robertson.¹⁰¹

More recently, this monitor has documented the growing influence of the Number prison gangs and street gangs in the West Coast region, with towns such as Saldanha Bay, Vredenburg and Paternoster experiencing escalating violence as a result.¹⁰²

One factor underpinning this trend has been changes in the global cocaine trade, with local groups collecting consignments dropped off at sea and storing them on behalf of international trafficking syndicates.¹⁰³

These cases suggest that access to illicit markets is a central driver of gang expansion into smaller towns. As a senior member of a gang observed, 'It's about money ... It's all about business.'¹⁰⁴

Outlying areas also tend to have a smaller police capacity and lower levels of surveillance than urban centres, allowing gangs to operate with greater freedom and less risk of detection.¹⁰⁵ As another gang member put it, 'The network of police and response to smuggling and things is not as quick or big.'¹⁰⁶

Competition over turf can also drive activity out of the city. Smaller or newer gangs that struggle to establish themselves on the Cape Flats may seek opportunities in less contested towns, where they perceive they will face fewer rivals. 'They try their luck here and it didn't work,' one gang member explained. 'These *moegoes* [idiots] maybe tried to challenge a bigger gang and a small turf war started and they lost, so now they try their luck in smaller towns and maybe they win a little.'¹⁰⁷



FIGURE 2 Hotspots of gang activity in Malmesbury.

The development of gangsterism in Malmesbury

Before 2021, Malmesbury experienced relatively low levels of gang-related violence.¹⁰⁸ Escalating competition between gangs in the nearby suburb of Atlantis, however, contributed to a significant shift in the local landscape.¹⁰⁹ As the 28s and the Fancy Boys gangs vied for influence in Atlantis, conflict spread to involve other gangs, including the Americans, the G-Units and the Starlux gang.¹¹⁰ This resulted in the G-Units ultimately abandoning their operations in the town, with many members relocating to Malmesbury.¹¹¹

Shortly afterwards, the Fancy Boys moved into the area too, resulting in a flare-up in violence.¹¹² This is reflected in the SAPS statistics, which recorded an increase in murders in the area from 19 during the 2021/22 reporting period to 27 in 2022/23.¹¹³ Other gangs have since moved into the area from Cape Town, including the Americans, the Junior Cisco Yakkies, Mongrels, Dogg Pounds and Skombizos, attracted by opportunities to expand drug markets, exploit weaker law enforcement and establish themselves in less contested territory.¹¹⁴

Two local gangs have also emerged in the area: the Bloedspatters and the Sesde Straat se Kinders.¹¹⁵ The latter appears to function as a junior gang linked to the G-Units, and reportedly consists

of children between the ages of 11 and 14.¹¹⁶ According to one community member, local children see gang bosses as ‘inspirational’: ‘He is driving a BMW, he has a lot of money ... These *laaities* [children] think they can get that type of life if they join the gangs.’¹¹⁷

The creation or adoption of youth divisions is a common tactic used by gangs across the Western Cape to socialize young people into gang culture and create a pipeline of future foot soldiers. The emergence of this practice in Malmesbury is concerning, as it suggests that gang influence is becoming increasingly normalized and entrenched within the community.¹¹⁸

Most gang-related activity and violence in Malmesbury is concentrated in Wesbank, an area that was historically designated for the Coloured¹¹⁹ population under the spatial segregation policies of the apartheid era. Various gangs, including the Mongrels, Americans, G-Units, Bloedspatters, Dogg Pounds and Fancy Boys, are alleged to be active in this hotspot (see Figure 2). As Malmesbury’s gang landscape is still taking shape, territorial boundaries are fluid and the exact extent of each gang’s influence is difficult to determine. However, most gang activity and related violence is concentrated in the areas highlighted on the above map.

As our monitoring has repeatedly shown, a higher concentration of gangs in a given area heightens the risk of conflict. In Wesbank, and Malmesbury at large, gangs compete for control of lucrative illicit markets, particularly the drug trade. These disputes frequently trigger cycles of retaliation, with stabbings and shootings used to enforce territorial claims, settle grievances and deter rivals. The recent conflict between the Mongrels and the Americans, which resulted in the death of 'Frog' Philander, is a notable example. As the number of gangs operating in the area has increased, so too has the potential for such dynamics to take hold.

The criminal economy

The Fancy Boys reportedly decided to move into towns in the *platteland* (rural and agricultural areas) to capitalize on untapped drug markets that offered greater profit-making opportunities.¹²⁰ The Americans' objectives were said to be similar: enter the area and start a 'pos' (a drug-selling point).¹²¹

The drug economy is the largest and most lucrative illicit enterprise in Malmesbury. Its growth has been driven, in part, by gangs seeking new, less contested, commercial opportunities beyond their traditional strongholds. With the market on the Cape Flats reportedly saturated, and consumers accustomed to higher-purity product, rural towns such as Malmesbury offer an outlet for diluted, or 'half kick', *tik* and Mandrax, which can be sold at full-strength prices.¹²²

Malmesbury's role in the drug trade, however, extends beyond the burgeoning local consumer market. As our research has indicated, outlying towns in the Western Cape are increasingly being used as storage hubs along strategic, transnational transport routes, connecting drug entry points, such as Saldanha Bay and Hout Bay, in the case of cocaine, to urban areas, where demand is highest.¹²³ Malmesbury is strategically located for this trade: it is near to Saldanha Bay¹²⁴ and connected to Cape Town by the N7 highway.

Rise in criminal governance

Gang leaders often provide communities with income opportunities, protection and services that would usually be provided by the state, allowing them to cultivate local support, build an irregular form of legitimacy and exercise criminal governance.¹²⁵ This dynamic has been widely documented in the Western Cape.¹²⁶

In the case of Malmesbury, a number of criminal entrepreneurs have emerged who, through time spent in prison, have developed affiliations with the Number gangs.¹²⁷ Some have established themselves as reformed criminals, and are regarded as generous philanthropists by the community.¹²⁸ The enduring poverty in certain parts of the town, a legacy of apartheid and post-apartheid governance failures,¹²⁹ means that many residents accept their assistance. In effect, this has enabled them to buy goodwill and strengthen their standing within the community. One gang member said, 'Gang bosses will maybe support the local community with their "give-back" campaigns ... maybe sponsor sports for the children or help the old people with food or bills.'¹³⁰

This support can translate into practical forms of cooperation with members of the community, who may agree to store contraband in private homes, act as informers, alert gangs to police activity or remain silent when information is sought by law enforcement.¹³¹ In this way, criminal governance serves to entrench gang influence and illicit economic activity within the community.

A window for intervention

That gang activity has spread to Malmesbury highlights weaknesses in policing and governance responses, which, if addressed, could help prevent similar dynamics from taking root elsewhere.

Gang members themselves said that part of their incentive for moving to smaller towns was weaker law enforcement and surveillance.¹³² This suggests that police capacity in outlying areas needs to be strategically strengthened. Achieving this requires deploying additional vehicles to boost police visibility and response times, alongside greater investment in intelligence and investigative capabilities to stem further rural expansion and dismantle the groups already established in these areas.

Additionally, criminal governance must be addressed. First, the state needs to increase its presence in these communities through improved service delivery and social support programmes. Second, community organizations, many of which are on the front lines of violence prevention and mediation, should be supported to build resilience to gang influence. Third, addressing the recruitment of children into gangs should be considered a priority. Strengthening state and civil society support for vulnerable communities could help limit gang recruitment and, over time, weaken gangs' hold within affected communities.

Court again hears evidence of cops supplying gangs with guns

More than a decade after former police colonel Christiaan Prinsloo was arrested for his role in one of South Africa's largest known guns-to-gangs networks – which also involved fellow colonel David Naidoo – he was back in a Cape Town courtroom in September 2026.

This time, he was not in the dock, but giving evidence in the Western Cape High Court trial of Vereeniging gun collector and dealer Alan Raves and Cape Town restaurant owner Irshaad Laher, to whom he and Naidoo say they sold firearms they were responsible for destroying.¹³³ Laher is accused of supplying firearms to gangs, and Raves is accused of supplying them to far-right groups.¹³⁴

The case reached the court on 4 November 2016, but the trial began only in September 2026 after delays, making it the oldest case on the court's roll, according to Judge Constance Nziweni.¹³⁵ Raves and Laher face charges including racketeering, corruption, theft of firearms and ammunition, and contraventions of the Firearms Control Act.¹³⁶

Rewinding to the Prinsloo trial, in 2016 he pleaded guilty to 11 charges relating to crimes that he said began in 2007/2008, including racketeering (under the Prevention of Organised Crime Act), corruption, theft of police-owned firearms set aside for destruction and related offences under the Firearms Control Act for illegally selling confiscated weapons and ammunition to gang leaders on the Cape Flats and other groups. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison and served less than four before being released on parole.¹³⁷

Naidoo, Prinsloo's alleged accomplice, has chosen to testify as a state witness in the current trial in exchange for indemnity against prosecution. His testimony was yet to be heard at the time of writing.¹³⁸

The long-delayed start of Raves and Laher's trial reopens burning questions that go back to Prinsloo's conviction a decade ago, and the proceedings are set to re-animate broader issues that remain relevant to gang violence and organized crime in South Africa: the enduring circulation of illicit firearms, state embeddedness, direct collusion between the state and criminal networks and whether the criminal justice system has the capacity to prosecute complex networks.

Enough firearms to fill a courtroom

Evidence in Prinsloo's guilty plea indicated he supplied about 2 400 firearms to the black market through Raves and Laher, including about 2 000 that ended up in the arsenals of Cape Flats gangs.¹³⁹ However, the true number may be as many as 9 000.¹⁴⁰

PRINSLOO GUNS SAGA

- 2005** 100 066 firearms and nearly 2 million rounds of ammunition are handed in by citizens. The firearms are ballistically tested and sent to SAPS destruction facilities. Firearms from Gauteng are sent to SAPS Safe 10 in Silverton, Pretoria, pending destruction.
- 2008** Colonel Christiaan Prinsloo, the Gauteng head of firearm monitoring and compliance and Colonel David Naidoo, the officer in charge of collecting and destroying redundant firearms in Gauteng, start supplying gun collector Alan Raves with assault rifles from Safe 10.
- 2013** The Western Cape Forensic Pathology Laboratory examines firearms that have all been altered in the same way, their ballistic history erased. Serial numbers on some of the guns can be traced back to SAPS Safe 10, where the firearms were supposed to have been destroyed.
- 2014** Most firearms seized by the SAPS in the Western Cape have been altered in this peculiar way and are thought to be from a single origin.
- 2015** Prinsloo is arrested after a lengthy investigation by Western Cape SAPS, and both he and Naidoo confess to their role in supplying firearms to Raves and Laher. Raves and Laher are also arrested.
- 2016** Prinsloo enters a guilty plea and is sentenced to 18 years in prison.
- OCTOBER 2018** The assassination of Laher's lawyer, Pete Mihalik, further complicates a lengthy pretrial battle over evidence.
- 2019** Raves launches a High Court application to have his trial separated from Laher's as a result of his frustration over the slow court process. The application is dismissed.
- 2020** Raves appeals the dismissal of the 2019 application.
- AUGUST 2020** Prinsloo is released on parole after serving three years and 10 months of his 18-year sentence. He reportedly benefited from a special remission of sentence.
- 2021** Raves's 2020 appeal is dismissed.
- AUGUST 2022** The case is declared trial ready and set to start in October 2025.¹⁴¹
- 2023** Gun Free SA launches a class action against the police minister for victims seeking damages for the families of people killed or injured by guns supplied to gangs.
- OCTOBER 2025** On the day the trial is set to start, Raves's defence counsel is unavailable due to medical reasons. The matter is postponed to February 2026.¹⁴²
- FEBRUARY 2026** On the day trial is set to start, Raves brings an application for the judge in the case to be dismissed, claiming she is biased. The application is dismissed, clearing the way for the trial to start.¹⁴³
- SEPTEMBER 2026** The Raves and Laher trial finally starts in the Western Cape High Court.



A 2015 warning statement by Naidoo, which forms part of the state's evidence in the trial of Raves and Laher, casts doubt on Prinsloo's assertion that Laher led him to believe the guns would be sold to sailors docked at Cape Town harbour for defence against pirates.¹⁴⁴ According to Naidoo's statement, he believed Prinsloo had a Gauteng buyer (Raves) and a Western Cape buyer (Laher) for his firearms. He claims Prinsloo once told him that 'the war down south is lucrative' and that Prinsloo 'really wanted to find out who the opposition was so that he could supply both sides'.¹⁴⁵

From Prinsloo and Naidoo's affidavits, it emerges that they also supplied Raves with rifles, including R1s that Prinsloo believed Raves was supplying to right-wingers. The affidavits describe poor record-keeping of the hundreds of thousands of firearms the state accumulated through seizures and voluntary surrenders during the 2005 firearms amnesty. Naidoo and Prinsloo realized that no monitoring process prevented them from selling firearms instead of destroying them.¹⁴⁶

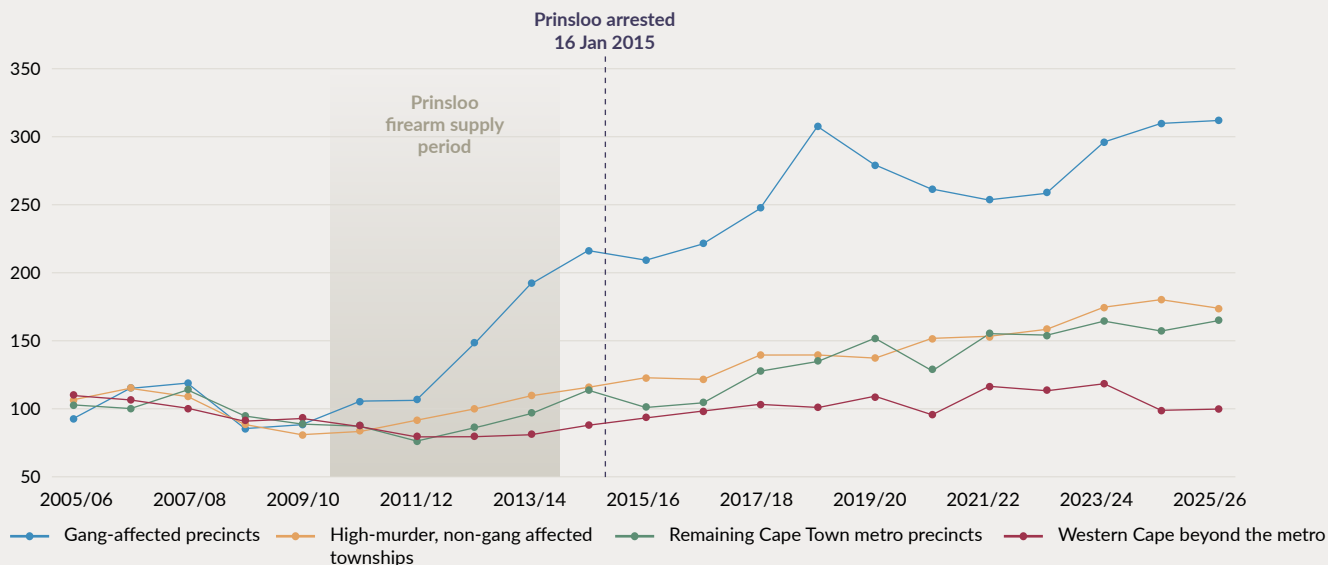


FIGURE 3 Murders per year in City of Cape Town precincts and the Western Cape province.

Note: Murders in the 13 SAPS precincts with known gang activity in the City of Cape Town began to outpace those in both high-murder township precincts and the rest of the Cape Town metro around the period when Christiaan Prinsloo allegedly started supplying firearms to Irshaad Laher. Source: SAPS crime statistics, SAPS Crime Registrar, Christiaan Prinsloo's 2015 statement to the SAPS.

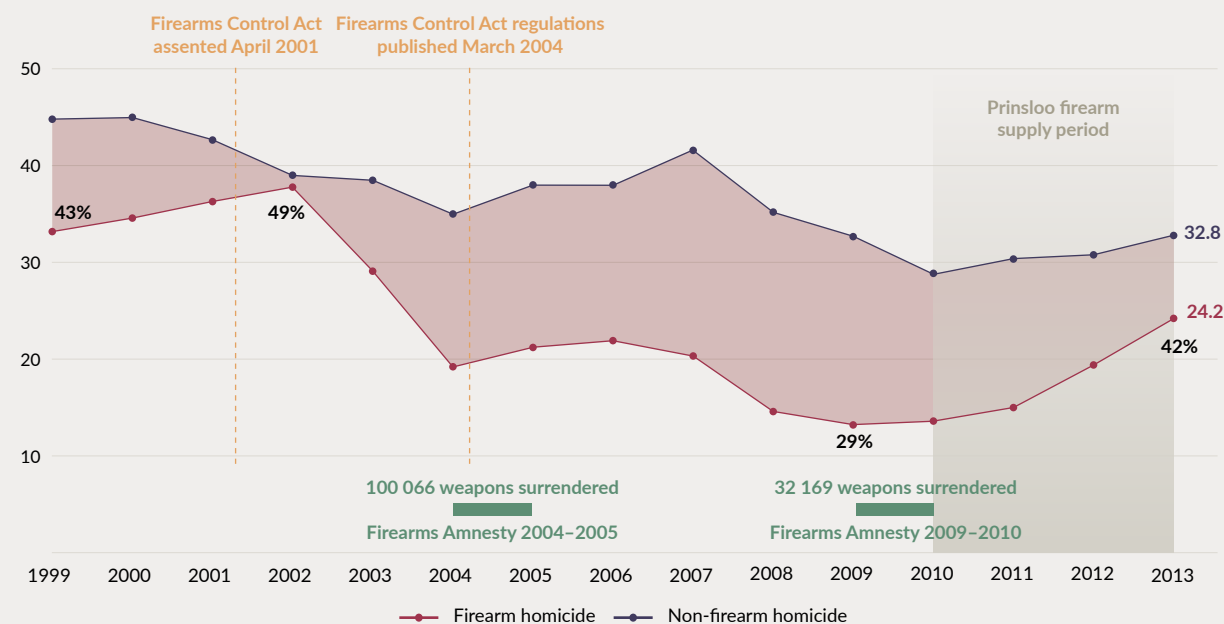


FIGURE 4 Firearm and non-firearm homicide in the City of Cape Town per 100 000 people.

Source: R Matzopoulos et al, A retrospective time trend study of firearm and non-firearm homicide in Cape Town from 1994 to 2013, *South African Medical Journal*, 108, 3 (2018); Parliamentary Monitoring Group; Christiaan Prinsloo's 2015 statement to the SAPS.

THE TWO ACCUSED

Irshaad Laher

Prinsloo met Irshaad Laher around 1995, when he was the commander of De Deur police station near Vereeniging, Gauteng. He described Laher as a firearm and hunting enthusiast and an active member of neighbourhood watch groups. According to Prinsloo's statement to the police in December 2015, Laher told him he had a market for 9mm firearms in the Western Cape and asked the police officer to supply him with the guns. Laher later moved to Cape Town, where he owned two restaurants. He faces charges of racketeering, corruption and illegal possession of firearms and ammunition.¹⁴⁷

Alan Raves

Alan Raves and Prinsloo became friends after Raves – then the provincial designated firearms official for the Vereeniging area – contacted him for advice on firearm licensing procedures, forming a close bond over a mutual love of guns and hunting. According to Prinsloo and Naidoo, they gave Raves access to SAPS Safe 10 in Silverton, Pretoria, as a South African Heritage Resource Centre heritage firearms expert and inspector. He allegedly removed parts from R1, R4, R5 and AK-47 assault rifles that could turn semi-automatic civilian models into fully automatic weapons. He also allegedly helped himself to thousands of rounds of assault rifle ammunition. Prinsloo claims he told Naidoo to stop providing Raves with firearms after he became convinced that Raves (whom he claimed had racist views) was supplying right-wing groups, including the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging.¹⁴⁸

Testifying in the September trial about his role in the case, Prinsloo claimed the 9mm pistols he supplied to Laher were altered so they could not be traced back to him and Naidoo, who had custody of the firearms before they were supposed to be destroyed.¹⁴⁹

The number of firearms Prinsloo and Naidoo had access to makes Prinsloo's claim that he had sold 2 400 guns difficult to believe. Testifying in September, Prinsloo said Safe 10 held up to 100 000 firearms scheduled for destruction. Explaining to the court what such a pile might look like, he said it would fill the courtroom from floor to ceiling.

Prinsloo claims he sold firearms only while Naidoo oversaw Safe 10 between 2008 and 2011. He claims he never removed firearms while he had custody of the safe, as he suspected it to be under surveillance. However, he continued to supply firearms to Laher until May 2013, claiming he and Naidoo had removed them before he took custody of the safe.¹⁵⁰

Ongoing vulnerabilities in the system

The Prinsloo case is one of South Africa's most consequential examples of state-embedded actors directly enabling organized crime by arming criminal groups. But it is not the only example – alleged Cape Town gangsters Ralph Stanfield and Nafiz Modack have faced charges related to defrauding the police's Central Firearms Registry with the help of corrupt state officials who allegedly manipulated paperwork to process their gun licences. The charges against Stanfield, which have since been withdrawn, dated back to 2014; the charges against Modack date back to 2017.¹⁵¹ Firearms continue to disappear from police custody, including the secure SAPS 13 stores at police stations used to house physical evidence, confiscated property and exhibits collected during criminal investigations, and the state remains a major supplier of firearms to gangs.¹⁵²

A decade after Prinsloo's conviction, as the Madlanga Commission and parliamentary hearings expose fresh evidence of corruption and criminal infiltration within criminal justice institutions, the case is again relevant: the systemic vulnerabilities Prinsloo revealed in 2015 persist.

According to Gun Free SA, police records show that 888 firearms supplied by Prinsloo and Naidoo, allegedly through Laher and Raves, have been forensically connected to 1 066 murders in the Western Cape. The civil rights organization said 89 children had been killed and 170 injured with firearms linked to the network.¹⁵³ Many of the guns are believed still to be in circulation, and the harm they have caused over the years is likely to be much greater than that shown by police forensics.

This case exposes enduring weaknesses in the criminal justice system's response to organized crime. More than a decade after the original arrests, the proceedings against Laher and Raves remain part of the judicial process, and firearms are still leaking from state armouries to gangs with the help of state officials.

The length and complexity of the case also raise questions about the state's capacity to investigate and prosecute networks. Organized crime prosecutions often take years to conclude. The proceedings against Laher and Raves illustrate the difficulty of reconstructing and prosecuting networks long after the underlying criminal activity occurred. Delays are also confounding because evidence, witnesses' recollections and institutional knowledge deteriorate over time.

One of the most important questions is what changed after Prinsloo and Naidoo's initial testimonies to police investigators. In 2015, they confessed to a crime that started in 2007/2008,¹⁵⁴ but the current trial and the Madlanga Commission are now airing unresolved issues that are still at the heart of today's gang-violence problem.

DISAGGREGATING THE GANG LANDSCAPE

With the Western Cape accounting for approximately 87% of South Africa's gang-related murders,¹⁵⁵ the province demands extraordinary measures to deal with gangsterism. However, an accurate breakdown of the phenomenon is lacking, with the number of active groups and their total membership disputed.¹⁵⁶ This hinders the implementation of comprehensive interventions that match the true scale of the problem. Building on previous research, recent data gathering efforts by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) attempt to provide a more detailed picture of the Western Cape gang phenomenon.

On-the-ground research conducted by the GI-TOC over the past six years has revealed that, in its current form, the Western Cape gang ecosystem comprises some 113 street gangs and factions dispersed across the province.¹⁵⁷

Although fragmentation has resulted in the formation of breakaway gangs in recent years, contributing to an increase in the number of gangs present,¹⁵⁸ centralization has also meant that many smaller gangs have been absorbed into the ranks of more powerful ones. The Fancy Boys, for instance, have recruited members of other gangs and, in some cases, entire gangs.¹⁵⁹ One example of this is the Nike Boys, a small gang based in Bishop Lavis, which was completely assimilated by the Fancy Boys in 2024.¹⁶⁰ These factors were accounted for when estimating the total number of gangs.

Gang tiers and structure

Western Cape gangs can be categorized into four distinct tiers based on their geographic spread, level of influence, financial stability, money-laundering capabilities, the extent of their broader networks and illicit supply chains, membership numbers, and access to firearms and ammunition. Together, these gangs make up an interconnected and resilient criminal ecosystem that is responsible for high levels of violence, child recruitment,¹⁶¹ a large and diverse drug market,¹⁶² the growing extortion economy, and the vast quantity of illegal firearms and ammunition present in the region.¹⁶³

First tier gangs

These gangs are highly sophisticated, multi-million-rand enterprises operating in numerous illicit markets. They are often driven and sustained by international illicit supply chains and extensive corrupt networks, and their leaders also integrate underworld operations into the legitimate economy. These groups have a wide geographical reach and control territory across several communities in the province. They also have access to large pools of foot soldiers and weapons caches, which they can readily deploy to defend and expand their turf. The six most prominent Western Cape gangs have first-tier status: the Fancy Boys, the Americans, the 28s (The Firm),¹⁶⁴ the Sexy Boys, the Hard Livings and the Terrible Josters (see Figure 6).

Interviews with gang members, police officials, and community organizations have revealed that these six gangs have a combined membership of approximately 90 000–100 000 people.¹⁶⁵

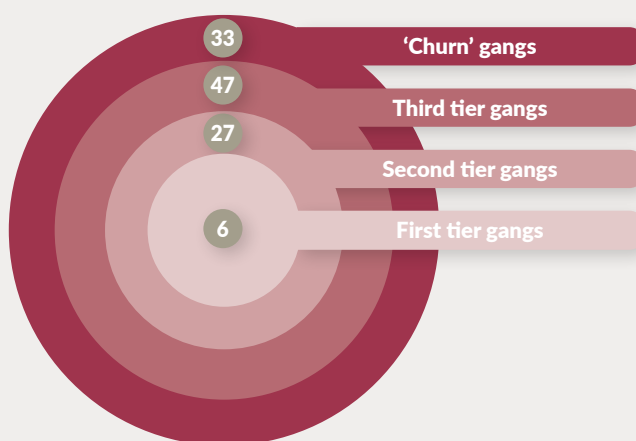


FIGURE 5 Gangs can be categorized according to their influence and resources.

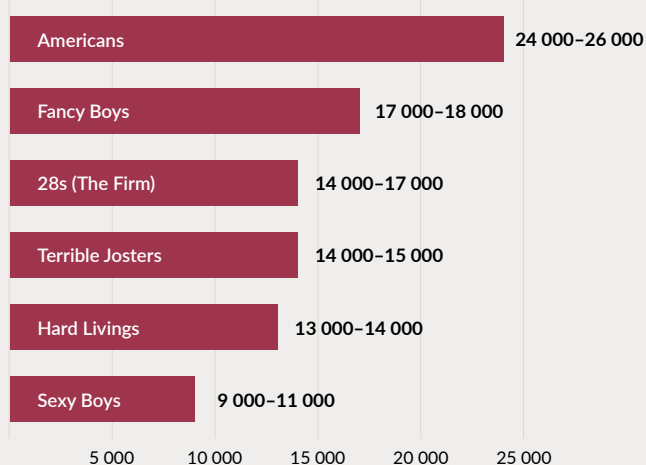


FIGURE 6 First tier gangs and estimated membership.

Second tier gangs

These are aspiring elite organizations that are actively positioning themselves for upward mobility within the Western Cape gang ecosystem. They tend to be heavily armed and extremely violent, commanding significant territorial control and financial power. However, they have not yet achieved the extensive geographical spread or multi-million-rand status of their first-tier counterparts. These gangs often form partnerships with first-tier gangs, whereby the latter supply them with drugs in exchange for access to hitmen.

SECOND TIER GANGS

Nice Time Kids
Bad Boys
Dixie Boys
Young Gifted Bastards
Young Gifted Six Bobs
Gifteds
Six Bobs
Junior Mafia
Skombizos (27s)
Junky Funky Kids
Ghetto Kids
Fast Guns
Inglourious Basterds
Talibans
Laughing Boys
Wonder Kids
Cisko Yakkies
G-Units
Bad Boys
Mongrels
Rude Boys
Yuru Kats
Rasta Gang
Gupta Gang
Boko Haram
Nigerian gangs (unnamed)
Congolese gangs (unnamed)

Third tier gangs

These are mid-level criminal groups that are localized to a limited number of areas. With membership typically restricted to a maximum of 300 people, these gangs have a smaller number of firearms and are usually involved in only a few illicit markets.

THIRD TIER GANGS

Nonghi Boys
Firm Boys
Terribilistics
Horribles
Terribles
Gifted Bastards
Clever Kids
Mobsters
Westsidiers
Stupa Boys
Flakka Kids
Only the Family
Only the Firm
Born Free Kids
Spoilt Brats
Oka Boys
Kways
Unit Boys
Playaz 4 Life
Young Ones
Dogg Pounds
Convicts
Stealers
Vikings
Junior Cisko Yakkies
Disciples
Apostles
Corner Boys
Genuine School Boys
Hustlers
No Fears
Born Frees
Naughty Boys
Terror Squad
Dollar Kids
Poor Little Rich Kids / Rich Kids
Vatos Locos
Gaza Boys
Pitbulls
Bavarians
Convicts
Jester Kids
Warriors
Rude Girls
Maparaparas
Gaza Mobsters
Outlaws



'Churn' gangs

'Churn' gangs are highly unstable, short-lived factions that are typically localized to a single area. Small female groups or newly formed junior breakout gangs tend to fit into this category. These groups lack weaponry and are typically involved in small-scale drug dealing. In most cases, they are eventually absorbed by more established groups.

CHURN GANGS

Three Bobs
Rooi Duiwels
Young Red Killers
Clinic Boys
Lady Lovers
Juris
Impossible Ones
Station Kids
Only the Brave
Only the Faithful
Laan Kids
Masse Kinners
Sexy Young Ones

CHURN GANGS

Young Gifted Ones
South Doggs
Park Boys
Bad Girls
Terrible School Boys
Night Pigs
Vuil gat Varke
Gaza Mobsters
Vuras 6
Sons of Satan
Joker Boys
Terrible Stouter Motors
Gigalos
Young Gigalos
Derwent Kids
Taylor gang
Jo Getta Girls
Sexy Girls
Bloedspatters
Sesde Straat se Kinders

Notes

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