

Unpacking the intricacies of extortion crime in South African townships

Desvendando as complexidades do crime de extorsão nos townships sul-africanos

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Abstract: South Africa grapples with a significant crime problem characterised by high rates of violent crime, robbery, murder, and sexual violence, propelled by socio-economic factors and structural dynamics of the country. These crimes are particularly rife in the townships where structural constraints rooted in sociohistorical and ongoing injustices fuel them. This article examines a relatively unacknowledged criminal economy, extortion, which has permeated South African townships over the last decade, affecting businesses, particularly those in the retail and construction industries. Drawing upon decolonial and critical paradigms, we argue that the thriving extortion economies in the townships are a consequence of the legacies of the apartheid era and a departure from the radical and social welfare agenda of the African National Congress (ANC). Additionally, we conceptually frame extortion that affects businesses with apartheid links in the townships as a

requit for years of overconcentration of disadvantage in these townships.

Keywords: gang violence, extortion, inequality, apartheid, South Africa

Resumo: A África do Sul enfrenta um problema significativo de criminalidade, caracterizado por altas taxas de crimes violentos, roubos, homicídios e violência sexual, impulsionados por fatores socioeconômicos e pelas dinâmicas estruturais do país. Esses crimes são particularmente prevalentes nos *townships*, onde restrições estruturais, enraizadas em injustiças sócio-históricas e ainda persistentes, contribuem para sua ocorrência. Este artigo examina uma economia criminal relativamente pouco reconhecida — a extorsão — que se disseminou pelos *townships* sul-africanos ao longo da última década, afetando empresas, especialmente nos setores de varejo e construção. Com base em paradigmas decoloniais e críticos, argumenta-se que a expansão das economias de extorsão nos *townships* é uma consequência dos legados do *Apartheid* e de um afastamento da agenda radical e de bem-estar social do *African National Congress* (ANC). Ademais, propõe-se, em termos conceituais, compreender a extorsão que afeta empresas com vínculos ao *apartheid* nos *townships* como uma forma de retribuição pelos anos de concentração acumulada de desvantagens nessas áreas.

Palavras-chave: violência de gangues, extorsão, desigualdade, apartheid, África do Sul

1. Introduction

It is beyond doubt that criminal activities have been a consistent feature of human societies throughout history, with criminogenic factors often rooted in both socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions. The existing literature on the economic determinism of crime has frequently posited that criminal behaviour and/or activities can be understood through a rational choice framework, in which individuals engage in a cost-benefit analysis before committing offences, weighing potential gains against the penalties for apprehension.¹ Conversely, a broader, nuanced understanding may reveal that institutional structures, including those of immediate neighbourhoods,

¹ D'ALESSIO, S. J.; STOLZENBERG, L.; FLEXON, J. L. Economic inequality and the monetary reward in a robbery. *Journal of Economic Criminology*, v. 7, p. 100139, 2025.

significantly constrain or enable criminal actions.²⁻³⁻⁴ There are instances where a disproportionate allocation of resources leads to the neglect of other areas, particularly those characterised by concentrated disadvantage, which paradoxically exhibit higher crime rates despite receiving less proactive policing.⁵ Thus, areas with significant criminal activity remain underserved by law enforcement, while areas with lower crime rates receive an overabundance of police presence.⁶

In South Africa, underclass neighbourhoods,⁷ often referred to as townships, are traditionally considered crime hotspots. For instance, criminal activity is prevalent in poor communities and townships around Cape Town, particularly in Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Nyanga, and Mitchell's Plain.⁸ South Africa is a highly unequal middle-income country in which enduring structural poverty consigns large swathes of the population to the economic periphery.⁹ Scholars have traced the high rate of crime in South African townships to historical injustices under apartheid.¹⁰⁻¹¹⁻¹²⁻¹³ They argue that the regime was uninterested in fighting and preventing crime in areas occupied by Black Africans, as it had no policy in place for fighting and preventing crime in Black African communities. The government's priority was to protect minority White people and their paraphernalia. Apartheid was spending heavily on controlling black Africans to ensure there were no uprisings against it. Police and other resources were

² SAMPSON, R. J. Urban sustainability in an age of enduring inequalities: Advancing theory and econometrics for the 21st-century city. **Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences**, v. 114, n. 34, p. 8957-8962, 2017.

³ HINTON, E. From the war on poverty to the war on crime: the making of mass incarceration in America. In: **From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

⁴ SEWELL, A. A.; JEFFERSON, K. A. Collateral damage: the health effects of invasive police encounters in New York City. **Journal of Urban Health**, v. 93, n. Suppl 1, p. 42-67, 2016.

⁵ ÖZER, M.; KUCUKKAYA, G.; KOSE, Y.; MUKASHEVA, A.; CIRIS, K.; PENUMATCHA, B. V. Mapping Trafficking Networks: A Data-Driven Approach to Disrupt Human Trafficking Post Russia-Ukraine Conflict. In: **International Conference on Computational Science and Computational Intelligence**, Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024. p. 201-212.

⁶ FRANCHI, M.; ZAMFIRESCU-PEREIRA, J. D.; JU, W.; PIERSON, E. Detecting disparities in police deployments using dashcam data. In: **Proceedings of the 2023 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency**, 2023. p. 534-544.

⁷ Used contextually to mean poor neighbourhoods, not by choice, but due to social constraints and inequalities.

⁸ MANALIYO, J. C. Townships as crime 'hot-spot' areas in Cape Town: Perceived root causes of crime in site B, Khayelitsha — **Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences**, v. 5, n. 8, p. 596-603, 2014.

⁹ NEVES, D.; SAMSON, M.; VAN NIEKERK, I.; HLATSHWAYO, S.; DU TOIT, A. **The use and effectiveness of social grants in South Africa**. Finmark Trust, p. 60, 2009.

¹⁰ NLEYA, N.; THOMPSON, L. Survey Methodology in Violence-prone Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa. **IDS bulletin**, v. 40, n. 3, p. 50-57, 2009.

¹¹ DEMOMBYNES, G.; ÖZLER, B. Crime and local inequality in South Africa. **Journal of Development Economics**, v. 76, n. 2, p. 265-292, 2005.

¹² SINGH, A. M. Private security and crime control. **Theoretical Criminology**, v. 9, n. 2, p. 153-174, 2005.

¹³ SHAW, M. Gender and crime prevention. **International Observer**, v. 8, p. 1-20, 2002.

intensely allocated in White areas so crime and violence in Black African communities would not spiral into White areas.¹⁴ The apartheid regime also concentrated social amenities and economic activities in and around White areas.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ Within this historical context, this study contends that crime should not be viewed solely as an issue of individual behaviour but rather as a manifestation of deep-rooted structural inequalities and systems of racialised social control. By analysing both historical and contemporary contexts, this paper highlights how the legacies of apartheid-era spatial planning, widespread systemic poverty, and ingrained institutional racism continue to influence the dynamics of violence, property crime, and law enforcement practices in these marginalised communities.

The post-apartheid era has seen a slow but steady devolution and incursion of economic activities in townships, with malls and manufacturing outfits springing up. Over the last decade, these economic frontiers have faced an existential crisis from a relatively new form of crime: extortion. Businesses and construction companies in these townships often face extortion attempts. This, we argue, is a requital for the long years of sociohistorical neglect that have enabled crime in these areas.

In the sections that follow, we present the historical and socioeconomic context of South African townships and then outline the crime-control measures implemented by the government in these areas. Thereafter, we discuss the wave of extortion crimes affecting the construction industry (and retail spaces), and we will conclude by reflecting on key contours for controlling these crimes.

2. Historical and socioeconomic context of townships

The evolution and development of townships in South Africa can be traced back to the Apartheid era, even though the colonial conditions that propped it up long predated it. Apartheid is a social policy that governed racial relations between South Africa's White minority and non-White majority between 1948 and the early 1990s, sanctioning spatial segregation and socioeconomic and political discrimination against non-Whites. The policy mandated racial segregation by allocating certain racial groups to specific business and residential precincts. To give fervour to this policy, the apartheid government promulgated the Group Areas Act in 1950, and it became the fulcrum of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ ROGERSON, C. M.; ROGERSON, J. M. Racial discrimination in tourism: The record of apartheid Cape Town. **Modern Geográfia**, v. 20, n. 3, p. 47-67, 2025.

¹⁶ SEKONYELA, B. K.; GREGORY, J. J.; ROGERSON, J. M. Suburban transformation in post-apartheid South Africa: socio-economic mobility and neighbourhood change in 'in-between' spaces. **Modern Geográfia**, v. 19, n. 4, 2024.

apartheid spatial planning. This Act, in a manner that was racially scheming, situated commercial and industrial land uses far from the areas where Blacks, Coloureds, and Indians lived. This would mark the beginning of a continuum of historical (and ongoing) advantage and disadvantage. The Act purposefully underdeveloped townships and turned them into places for workers to sleep after commuting long distances to work in Whites-controlled central business districts (CBDs). Townships were deliberately underserved in terms of amenities, unlike those controlled by Whites, such as suburban nodes and city centres. Urban areas in proximity to white neighbourhoods were designed to have sensory appeal. The apartheid government designed and built these centres with sensory attractions, including beautiful architecture, social facilities, and shopping malls. However, sensory experiences, such as spaza shops, old or dilapidated homes, homelessness, waste disposal problems, etc., were associated with townships, thus reflecting class-based and racialised inequalities. Township life soon became analogous to poverty, unemployment, and sensory overload, characterised by poorly maintained neighbourhoods, overcrowding, and a polluted environment, which could trigger aggression or criminal behaviour as a coping mechanism.¹⁷ South African pass laws were also co-constitutive of the apartheid regime that focused on separating South African citizens on racial grounds. Under the apartheid regime, pass laws were promulgated, separating people by race and controlling where Black South Africans and other racial groups could go and work.¹⁸ Black people crossing into White areas and cities were required to have passbooks containing personal details and approvals. While the overarching aim behind these movement control laws was to establish White superiority over other racial groups and to establish the minority White regime, they also stifled economic opportunity and entrepreneurship in townships.

The South African society under apartheid may be conceptualised as a domain of dualism. By dualism, we mean the inverses that are experienced daily, and concurrently, in a class society.¹⁹ These inverses include advantage and disadvantage, access and restriction, affluence and poverty, opportunity and deprivation, etc. The structural and economic inequality being experienced by the non-White majority soon produced social disorganisation in the townships, including crime. Scholars have foregrounded the criminogenic effects of structural inequality.²⁰⁻²¹

¹⁷ AGNEW, R. The contribution of social-psychological strain theory to the explanation of crime and delinquency. In: **The Legacy of Anomie Theory**. London: Routledge, 2020. p. 113-137.

¹⁸ BODDY-EVANS, A. **Pass laws under apartheid. Apartheid Era Pass Laws of South Africa**, 2020.

¹⁹ DASTILE, N. P.; OLADEJO, A. O.; NNAM, M. U. Doing justice differently: A Pan-Africanist Perspective. In: **Routledge Handbook on Sensory Criminology**. In press, 2025.

²⁰ MATSUEDA, R. L.; GRIGORYEVA, M. S. Social inequality, crime, and deviance. In: **Handbook of the social psychology of inequality**. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2014. p. 683-714.

²¹ OUSEY, G. C.; LEE, M. R. Community, inequality, and crime. In: CULLEN, F. T.; WILCOX, P. (Ed.). **The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 352

The stark reality of townships is that, even in post-apartheid South Africa, social inequality and spatial patterns persist due to dependency and market forces.²²⁻²³⁻²⁴ Apartheid successfully established systems of entrenched economic geography that self-reinforce even after its abolition. To date, townships remain markedly impoverished, underserved, and crime-ridden. For instance, most of the crimes reported in the Western Cape, a South African province, are from townships where crime fighting is largely below par due to colonial legacies. Thus, the different sectors of the economy in townships, particularly construction and retail, face an existential crime crisis due to limited police resources. At the same time, the CBDs and areas where the privileged reside enjoy an abundance of police presence. The mismatch between demand and supply of police services is a constituent of the significant crime problem faced in townships. Townships often lack adequate lighting, surveillance coverage, and a sufficient police presence. Additionally, due to the limited police resources, the investigation and prosecution of criminal activities in townships are ineffective, thereby deepening the volatility of the areas. Evidence suggests that police officers, sometimes, are afraid to carry out diligent prosecution of crimes and law enforcement in hostile neighbourhoods because of fear of violent retaliation and armed resistance.²⁵ The belief is that police station heads often prioritise the safety of their officers over aggressive crime-fighting. Thus, sending officers into hostile environments known for high levels of armed resistance is considered an unacceptable risk. This "failure to fight" is a strategic choice to avoid casualties among their own ranks.

3. Extortion crime in South African townships

Post-apartheid South Africa has made efforts to bolster economic activities in townships. Laws and reforms such as the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act, 2013 (SPLUMA), and the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Act have made incremental changes and sought to dismantle the colonial legacies that have held down the non-white majority, particularly Black people, in South Africa. Hence, there is a gradual penetration of developments, such as shopping malls and businesses, into

²² SMITH, J. L. Continuing processes of uneven development in post-apartheid South Africa. **African Geographical Review**, v. 41, n. 2, p. 168-188, 2022.

²³ SCHOEMAN, T. The spatial influence of apartheid on the South African city. **The Geography Teacher**, v. 15, n. 1, p. 29-32, 2018.

²⁴ FINE, B. (2018). **The political economy of South Africa: From minerals-energy complex to industrialisation**. Routledge.

²⁵ PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION. The state and safety of police officers in the line of duty. [S.l.]: **Public Service Association**, 2017. Available at: [psa_police_2017.pdf]. Access date: [24/03/2026].

townships.²⁶⁻²⁷ In South Africa, shopping malls play a central role in urban life. Businesses, malls, and the construction industry face serious extortion crime. Extortion is a sort of crime that occurs when people are forced through violence, or the threat of violence, to do something, like give money or property or provide a service, against their will.²⁸ Although extortion is not entirely new, it has taken on a more serious dimension over the last decade. Crime reports by the South African Police Service between April 2019 and March 2024 indicate that 6,056 extortion cases were reported nationwide, resulting in 2,389 arrests; however, only 178 convictions were secured.²⁹ Apparently, extortion crimes are under-prosecuted in South Africa, thus aiding the criminal act. At the inception of extortion economies, the gangs deploy maximum levels of violence and threats of violence to ensure compliance with their demands. After they have successfully consolidated their authority and the economy has taken root, violence levels may decline, even though the threat of violence remains.³⁰⁻³¹

A 2024 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime in Cape Town identified four distinct extortion economies in the city. The first identified extortion economy is the nighttime economy in the central business district. The activities of this extortion ring have evolved from targeting the city's nighttime economy to extorting businesses, including coffee shops and restaurants. The second one is Cape Town's construction extortion economy. The mafias operating in this economy target infrastructural projects and the construction industry. Their modus operandi is like that of their peers in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, and these criminal activities have spread to other provinces in South Africa. The third, and notably dangerous, extortion economy is the transport extortion economy, which has long existed within the minibus taxi industry in Cape Town. The extortion economy has seen a meteoric rise and devolved into extorting buses, private transport and even private vehicles. The last, and the one most relevant to this paper, is the township enterprise extortion economy. The individuals and gangs involved in this economy focus on

²⁶ MALGAS, M.; ZONDI, W. B. Challenges facing small business retailers in selected South African townships. **The Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management**, v. 12, n. 1, 2020.

²⁷ KUBONE, A. Z. M. **Effects of Emergence of Shopping Malls on SMMEs in eThekweni: A case study of Umlazi Township**. 2012. Doctoral dissertation (Doctoral dissertation) – University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 2012.

²⁸ QHOBOSHEANE, J. I. Mafia-style crimes: extortionists have South Africa's economies down the barrel of a gun. **ENACT Africa**, 2024. Available at: <https://enactafrica.org>. Access on: [18/02/2026].

²⁹ DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE. **The DA's Anti-Extortion Plan for South Africa Federal Policy Unit 2024**. 2024. Disponível em: https://cdn.da.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/21132910/DA_Anti-Extortion_Plan_6.pdf.

³⁰ QHOBOSHEANE, J. I., 2024, *ibid.*, 1.

³¹ CHARMAN, A.; PIPER, L. Xenophobia, criminality and violent entrepreneurship: violence against Somali shopkeepers in Delft South, Cape Town, South Africa. **South African Review of Sociology**, v. 43, n. 3, p. 81-105, 2012.

businesses and the construction industry. They disrupt construction sites and demand money or a stake in developmental projects, presenting themselves as emerging business forums.³² While their activities mainly affect formal businesses, the informal businesses are also affected.

Business owners and contractors are often extorted through protection fees.³³ Due to the precariousness of security in these townships, residents and businesses have adopted what Kirk and Papachristos refer to as legal cynicism —a cultural adaptation to persistent structural disadvantage and a belief that the law is not a reliable tool for justice or protection.³⁴ This may be an outcome of negative police encounters that make people less inclined to rely on police service or cooperate with police authorities for justice. Instead, they resort to extra-legal means, such as turning to criminal networks for security, thus perpetuating a cycle of the entrenchment of criminal enterprise. The informal businesses in townships, we argue, may not face as much threat from this type of extortion because of their local roots, which they leverage for survival. Conversely, formal businesses seeking to enter townships to tap into business opportunities face intense pressure from these extortionists, who may resort to violence if resisted. Retail malls that want to niche into township markets are particularly confronted with extortion during the construction phase and throughout actual business operations. This thriving criminal enterprise continues to occur in underserved and under-policed neighbourhoods where the disincentives for crimes are not strong, and where law enforcement and deterrence are weak. A retail mall in a township, or a construction project in a township, will face a higher threat than those in middle-class and affluent, enclosed suburbs. These businesses often do not benefit from the agglomeration economy and/or positive externalities, such as a superabundance of police and/or surveillance systems and government attention, that businesses in city centres enjoy. They also lack a strong cooperative security framework, where different businesses in an area collaborate to address common security threats by sharing information, working together on solutions, and enhancing security in the area, rather than relying on a unitary security effort by a single business enterprise.

The criminalities in townships are emblematic of the historically concentrated poverty, lack of or limited economic opportunities, social organisation, and public investment. These may fuel the illicit economy, which is one of the few viable means of achieving status and income.³⁵⁻³⁶ In essence, the historical injustices that marked

³² DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE, 2024, *ibid.*, 1.

³³ QHOBOSHEANE, J. I., 2024, *ibid.*, 10.

³⁴ KIRK, D. S.; PAPACHRISTOS, A. V. Cultural mechanisms and the persistence of neighbourhood violence. *American Journal of Sociology*, v. 116, n. 4, p. 1190-1233, 2011.

³⁵ WILSON, W. J. **The truly disadvantaged: the inner city, the underclass, and public policy**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.

³⁶ TYLER, T. R. **Why People Obey the Law**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

the apartheid era and post-apartheid vestiges are responsible for the extortion economy in South African townships. The predominantly White-owned businesses that are entering into townships for business and/or economic activities face extortion crime, which we believe is a requital for the years of service neglect in these townships. In the section below, we will critically evaluate the multifaceted government crime-control measures introduced in South African townships, assessing their effectiveness and the complexities and challenges inherent in their implementation.

4. An assessment of the government's crime control measures in South African townships

South Africa has implemented various crime prevention policies since the end of apartheid. In this section, we will discuss three of them: the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the establishment of Community Policing Forums (CPFs), and anti-gang units (AGUs). These crime control measures will be discussed in terms of their congruence (or lack thereof) with the lived realities and sociohistorical dynamics of township environments.

4.1 The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)

We posit that a lesser-known but critical crime control measure introduced by the South African government was the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This was a pivotal post-apartheid policy aimed at building a more equitable society and breaching the boundaries of change erected by the privileged classes.³⁷⁻³⁸⁻³⁹ The RDP with the mantra 'a better life for all' was the African National Congress (ANC) government's policy blueprint geared towards reducing poverty and restructuring the economy. With respect to poverty reduction, the programme was particularly focused on the historically disadvantaged non-White majority, inner cities, townships, and villages, beleaguered by socio-economic problems. Massive infrastructure investments were carried out, including the construction and delivery of

³⁷ MOYO, T.; MAMOBOLO, M. The national development plan (NDP): A comparative analysis with the reconstruction and development programme (RDP), the growth, employment and redistribution (GEAR) programme and the accelerated and shared-growth initiative (ASGISA). *Journal of Public Administration*, v. 49, n. 3, p. 946-959, 2014.

³⁸ MARAIS, H. *South Africa: limits to change: the political economy of transition*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

³⁹ ADELZADEH, A.; PADAYACHEE, V. The RDP White Paper: reconstruction of a development vision. *Transformation*, v. 25, n. 5, p. 1-18, 1994.

over a million RDP houses for low-income households.⁴⁰⁻⁴¹ Additionally, they were, alongside other households, especially in rural areas that were previously not connected to the electricity grid.⁴²⁻⁴³ The social welfare and integrated agenda of the RDP also encompassed access to clean water and sanitation, nutrition, and healthcare for previously excluded areas.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ Although social welfare and security schemes were not primary concerns in the RDP, the programme provided financial assistance to the poor and vulnerable. The RDP also aimed to enhance human capital development and increase citizen participation in policymaking.⁴⁸ This was to be achieved through an appropriate recognition for previously disregarded skills, and an integrated approach to education and training will make it possible to achieve maximum capacity. The programme was also designed to address the distortions in the economy that contributed to the burden of unemployment and deprivation of basic amenities necessary for a decent living.

While the manifest aim of the RDP was not to curtail crime, reducing poverty and engendering an inclusive economic structure are veritable crime-control measures. Studies have shown that societies that proactively address social inequality and social welfare programmes experience a concomitant reduction in crime rates.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰⁻⁵¹ The programme,

⁴⁰ AMOAH, C.; VAN SCHALKWYK, T.; KAJIMO-SHAKANTU, K. Quality management of RDP housing construction: myth or reality? *Journal of Engineering, Design and Technology*, v. 20, n. 5, p. 1101-1121, 2022.

⁴¹ NOKULUNGA, M.; DIDI, T.; CLINTON, A. Challenges of Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses in South Africa. In: **Proceedings of the International Conference on Industrial Engineering and Operations Management**, 2018. Anais... v. 2018, n. SEP, p. 1695-1702, 2018.

⁴² JOOSTE, K. P. **A load management system for fixed appliances in a safe DC RDP house**. 2017. Doctoral dissertation (Ph.D.)—Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

⁴³ MAPAKO, M.; PRASAD, G. The free basic electricity policy and rural grid-connected households, solar home system users and unelectrified households. In: **Proceedings of the International Conference on Domestic Use of Energy**, 2005. Anais... p. 29-31, 2005.

⁴⁴ ZITYE, L. **Towards inclusive communities: the right to water and sanitation for urban settlers in Cape Town, South Africa**. 2021. Dissertation (Master's degree in International Development) – Massey University, New Zealand, 2021.

⁴⁵ VISSER, W. “From RDP to gear to Post-Polokwane”. The ANC and the Provision of Social Security for Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, v. 45, n. 3, 2009.

⁴⁶ REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA. White Paper on Reconstruction and Development. **General Notice, Notice** 1954 of 1994, 1994.

⁴⁷ VISSER, W., 2009, *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA, 1994, *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ VIGNA, A.; CARDEILLAC GULLA, J.; CHOUHY, C. Punitive Inertia? Social Spending, Inequality, and Political Cycles in Uruguay: the Role of Policy and its Limits. *International Criminology*, p. 1-21, 2025.

⁵⁰ OLADEJO, A. O.; DASTILE, N. P. Of Materialism and Anomie: A Revisiting of the Yoruba People's Omoluabi Ethos. *African Historical Review*, p. 1-20, 2025.

⁵¹ DANIEL, U. S.; UDOUSORO, T. E.; EFFIONG, U. U. Population drift, crime rate and socio-economic development in Uyo Capital City, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. *Aksu Annals of Sustainable Development*, v. 2, n. 1, 2024.

while addressing the historical injustices of settler colonialism in South Africa, tangibly improved the living conditions for millions of South Africans who had been deliberately marginalised and impoverished. Marais argues that the programme's vision was to merge growth with development, utilising state-led investment to stimulate the economy and, in turn, uplift the poor and disadvantaged.⁵²

However, the ambitious RDP programme soon faced an implementation crisis, which a school of thought has attributed to fiscal constraints.⁵³⁻⁵⁴ Their position is that the new government inherited a strained economy and, to ensure macroeconomic stability and attract investment, needed to implement fiscal austerity and reduce the deficit. Conversely, another school of thought posits that the implementation crisis engulfing the programme had little to do with fiscal constraints, but rather with insufficient governmental capacity and ideological conflicts with the Government of National Unity (GNU), which eroded its effectiveness.⁵⁵⁻⁵⁶ They dub the programme's short-livedness and its replacement in 1996 with the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, which introduced privatisation, trade liberalisation, and a reduction in welfare spending, as a departure from the ANC's liberation struggle and as kowtowing to neoliberal orthodoxy.⁵⁷ The adoption of neoliberal policy prescriptions, which promote limited government intervention and deemphasise social welfare, marked the post-apartheid peripheralization of South Africa. It also marked a significant return to the social conditions in the apartheid era for the underprivileged, beleaguered townships and rural areas in South Africa. Mass poverty, worsening living conditions, and paucity of social infrastructure are the lived experiences in these localities. These are conditions capable of engendering criminal behaviours such as extortion.

⁵² MARAIS, H., 2001, *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵³ MBALEKI, C. Decomposing South Africa's Fiscal Dynamics Through Successive Policy Regimes in the Post-Apartheid Dispensation. **Journal of Public Administration**, v. 59, n. 2, p. 210-222, 2024.

⁵⁴ VIVEK, N. D. Transformation deferred: disparate development in post-apartheid South Africa (1994-2004). **PanAfrican Journal of Governance and Development**, v. 5, n. 1, p. 128-155, 2024.

⁵⁵ ONWUEGBUCHULAM, S. P. C. Square Pegs in Round Holes? An Assessment of State-Led Poverty Alleviation Strategies in South Africa. **African Journal of Development Studies**, v. 14, n. 1, 2024.

⁵⁶ MATEBESE, H.; MKHWANAZI, T.; LOSI, C. Analysing the policy and governance of the government of national unity in South Africa by assessing the ministerial expediency concerning educational credentials and experience: drawing insights from global comparative perspectives. **Global Journal of Political Science and Administration**, v. 12, n. 2, p. 63-91, 2024.

⁵⁷ MANGONGO, A. J. **Usage and Meaning of 'Economic Freedom' Among South African Policymakers**. 2024. Master's thesis (Mestrado)—University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (South Africa).

4.2 Community policing forums (CPFs)

Community policing forums in South Africa represent a fundamental move from a purely militaristic approach to police service to a service-based, community-centric policing model, emphasising partnerships and crime prevention over reactive interventions.⁵⁸⁻⁵⁹ This post-apartheid policing model shift aimed to professionalise the police service and foster better police-public relations with communities, thereby enhancing confidence and trust, building legitimacy, and improving service delivery.⁶⁰ This paradigm shift in policing was formally entrenched in the South African Police Service (SAPS) Act between 1998 and 1999, thus making community policing the operational philosophy of the South African police system.⁶¹ This policing ideology and the ensuing legislative framework specifically required the establishment of community policing forums (CPFs) at police stations to enhance accountability, promote cooperation between the SAPS and local communities, and monitor police effectiveness. While the South African Police Service Act provides for the establishment and general purpose of CPFs, the specific functions and operational nuances are not extensively detailed within the legislation, leading to variations in implementation.⁶²⁻⁶³ Notwithstanding these variations, CPFs have been intentionally designed to facilitate direct engagement between police authorities/representatives and community members, bolstering cooperation and dialogue aimed at identifying and resolving local safety concerns. Additionally, the conceptualisation and entrenchment of the community policing model within the police service framework in South Africa aligns with Section 206 of the Constitution and the White Paper on Safety and Security, thus reinforcing its role vis-à-vis the achievement of the National Development Plan 2030's vision of safer communities through integrated approaches and participatory security initiatives.⁶⁴

Without a doubt, this crime control measure has the potential to address the extortion economy in South African townships. Crime reduction or deterrence may

⁵⁸ BROGDEN, M.; SHEARING, C. **Policing for a New South Africa**. London: Routledge, 1997.

⁵⁹ VAN VUUREN, J. W. J. The evolution and status of community policing forums in South Africa. **Acta Criminologica: African Journal of Criminology & Victimology**, v. 9, n. 1, p. 100-107, 1996.

⁶⁰ BOATENG, F. D.; LEE, J. Y. Apartheid and post-apartheid analysis of public confidence in the police: A longitudinal analysis across time. Policing: **An International Journal**, v. 41, n. 6, p. 76xz6-781, 2018.

⁶¹ MANGAI, M. S.; PILLAY, A. C.; MASIYA, T.; LUBINGA, S. The police and citizens as co-producers of crime prevention in Johannesburg. **Administrative Sciences**, v. 13, n. 6, p. 138, 2023.

⁶² FAULL, A. How to map violence without police data. **ISS Southern Africa Report**, n. 22, p. 1-24, 2019.

⁶³ BRUCE, D. Policing powers, politics, pragmatism and the provinces: revitalising policing oversight in the Western Cape. **South African Crime Quarterly**, n. 40, p. 3-14, 2012.

⁶⁴ MANGAI, M. S.; PILLAY, A. C.; MASIYA, T.; LUBINGA, S., 2023, *ibid.*, p.13.

be achieved when the local communities are involved in law enforcement and security of their communities through vigilant surveillance and behaviour reporting.⁶⁵ If this were as effective as envisioned, it would have largely stemmed the tide of extortion in South Africa, affecting retail businesses and the construction industry. However, the CPFs in South Africa face recurrent and profound constraints that weaken their effectiveness, particularly stemming from their foundational implementation in socio-economically and racially diverse community landscapes. One notable constraint is the varied and inconsistent performance across communities, with more affluent areas often exhibiting stronger CPF performance due to professional participation and greater resource allocation, a stark contrast to under-resourced communities.⁶⁶ This variance is further worsened by a pervasive trust deficit between the police and community members, leading to a reluctance to share crucial information about criminal activities and hindering active participation in CPF initiatives. The challenges of trust building can be traced to historical grievances and perceived police corruption, which deters citizens from engaging in co-production efforts for crime prevention. Moreover, the considerable gap in police-to-population ratio, which stands at 1:430, further diminishes public confidence in law enforcement, compounding the challenges faced by CPF initiatives.⁶⁷ This deficit of police officers is only a layer of the resource deficit; there are challenges regarding critical logistical support, such as vehicles, which hinder the timely response and comprehensive coverage necessary for effective community policing, particularly in expansive or difficult-to-access informal settlements.⁶⁸

4.3 Anti-gang Units (AGU)

This is another notable measure that the South African government has implemented to address the surge in crime in townships. The anti-gang units are offshoots of South Africa's National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy, introduced in 2017. The explosion of gang-related violence, particularly in Provinces like the Western Cape, necessitated

⁶⁵ LARSSON, S. A first line of defence? Vigilant surveillance, participatory policing, and the reporting of "suspicious" activity. *Surveillance and society*, v. 15, n. 1, p. 94-107, 2017.

⁶⁶ PRUD'HOMME, J. A.; ANASARIAS, E.; MASUKO, T.; LANGA, M.; BOYCE, C. C.; LARSEN, K.; ALLEN, R. **Legal study on policing and human rights standards: internationally and in three countries of the global south** (South Africa, Philippines and Liberia), 2017.

⁶⁷ MACINGWANE, A.; ISAFIADE, O. E. **HP-Growth: A Novel Approach of Frequent Pattern-Based Model for Community Policing in South Africa**. (PDF) HP-Growth: A Novel Approach of Frequent Pattern-Based Model for Community Policing in South Africa, 2024.

⁶⁸ REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA. **Report of the Auditor-General of South Africa on the audit of the financial statements of the South African Police Service for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 financial years**. Pretoria: AGSA, 2023.

specialised law enforcement interventions.⁶⁹⁻⁷⁰ This urgency led to the formation of Anti-Gang Units within the South African Police Service, and it was conceived and framed to directly confront the intricate dynamics of organised crime and gang activities that have plagued these communities.⁷¹ These units aim to mitigate the pervasive impact of gang warfare, which has at times resulted in the temporary closure of educational institutions and the classification of certain areas as "red zones" due to extreme risk.⁷² The establishment of these units reflects a strategic shift towards more targeted policing, moving beyond generalised crime prevention to address the specific methodologies and organisational structures of criminal gangs.⁷³ This specialised approach is critical given that South Africa experiences one of the highest rates of criminal violence globally, with such cities as Cape Town exhibiting murder rates significantly exceeding the national average, primarily attributed to gang activities. The complex nature of these criminal enterprises, often involving evolving tactics, further compounds the challenges faced by law enforcement, necessitating continuous adaptation in their operational strategies. Such adaptation, at times, has involved deploying the South African National Defence Force (NDF) to supplement police efforts in gang-ridden areas, particularly in targeted "hotspot" interventions aimed at disrupting gang operations and restoring public order.⁷⁴ This law enforcement initiative temporarily increased police presence and curtailed crime in the affected areas. However, resource constraints and corruption challenges have limited its effectiveness.

5. Combating extortion crime: key contours

Crime fighting is a challenging task that often requires a multifaceted approach. This is because there are usually underlying, latent factors behind specific criminal actions rather than the manifest factors attributed to criminal behaviours. Extortion is

⁶⁹ VILTOFT, C. D. Deconstructing gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the need for gender-sensitive policies. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, v. 14, n. 3, p. 1-14, 2022.

⁷⁰ MARINGIRA, G.; GIBSON, D. Maintaining order in townships: Gangsterism and community resilience in post-apartheid South Africa. *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, v. 9, n. 2, p. 55-74, 2019.

⁷¹ PETRUS, T.; UWAH, C.; DAVIDS, D.; JONAS, B. Softening the 'Iron Hand': re-thinking punitive approaches to addressing gang subcultures in South Africa. *Artha Journal of Social Sciences*, v. 21, n. 2, 2022.

⁷² CANO, I.; KRIEGLER, A.; SCOTT, D.; NTSHEKISA, Z. S. "Soldiers against gangsters?": Evaluation of the impact of the army deployment against gang violence on homicides in the Cape Flats. *SA Crime Quarterly*, n. 72, p. 1-17, 2023.

⁷³ MABASA, H. M.; OLUTOLA, A. A. The structure of South African police: Towards a single police service. *Cogent Social Sciences*, v. 7, n. 1, p. 1959974, 2021.

⁷⁴ THERON, K.; BREETZKE, G. D.; SNYMAN, L.; EDELSTEIN, I. A street segment analysis of crime in a township: evidence from South Africa. *Police Practice and Research*, v. 24, n. 5, p. 539-557, 2023.

peculiarly a township crime problem. This is because South Africa's city centres are not exposed to the vagaries of this criminal behaviour. Therefore, contextualising this crime within its socio-historical milieu is a critical departure point for addressing it. A dearth of social infrastructure, including police service, in townships is a historical context for this criminal venture. Therefore, a critical first step is to revisit and recommit to the revolutionary ideology of the founders of the ANC, which showed promise in redressing historical injustices rather than tokenism and political rhetoric, which have now defined the government's current commitment to the plights of the poor and historically disadvantaged South Africans living in townships. The radical welfare state that was overthrown by liberal policy prescriptions from the core countries needs to be revived. There is no proof that the liberal economic system has been successful in Africa. However, imperial centres continue to push for it at the expense of the community-first, diffuse economic system that is authentically African. Inclusivity and a committed effort to uplift South Africans from the poverty margins are crucial to reducing criminal activities, including extortion, in South Africa.

To combat extortion in South African townships, funding and human resources gaps should be closed. High-crime areas require a high level of police service. Hence, police authorities need to deploy more officers to these areas and provide them with adequate resources to support their efforts. Currently, the police-to-population ratio of 1:430 shows a marked shortage of police in South Africa, and studies have shown a correlation between inadequate police-to-population ratios and crime.⁷⁵ Population growth has not been matched with police recruitment. The police-to-population ratio was 1:248 in 1994.⁷⁶ Worse still, the police service overconcentrates in areas with lower crime rates in South Africa, while crime-endemic areas lack adequate policing. Recruiting and resourcing police officers requires a significant budget allocation, which the limited government funds may hinder. However, efforts can be made incrementally to address this. Alternatively, a police trust fund can be created to bridge the funding gaps. Nowadays, creating special funds is fast becoming a common practice among countries, especially developing ones. For instance, in Nigeria, the Nigeria Police Trust Fund, established in 2019, ensures that funding is sourced from both the public and private sectors to support the overall reform and strengthening of the police service. South Africa currently has the South African Police Service Education Trust Fund (SAPSET) for the provisioning of financial or any other form of assistance to a child or children of a member of the South African Police Service employed under the Police Act as well as the Public Service Act that died in the execution of official duties or on duty, by financing the costs of such child's or children's educational

⁷⁵ MACINGWANE, A.; ISAFIADÉ, O. E., 2025, *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁶ MARS, L. A. F. **Police service delivery challenges faced by South African police station commanders in the Western Cape**, 2021.

needs. This may be repurposed, and its scope widened to the general police service funding. Related to that, to reduce extortion in South African townships, the scale of police deployment between townships and previously White-dominated areas needs to be balanced. An increased police presence in townships is an important measure to curb emerging cases of extortion.

Moreover, police-public relations is a critical crime-fighting method. As is the case with many hitherto colonised societies, South Africans have little or no trust in the police service; hence, in certain circumstances, they hold back from cooperating with the SAPS. Studies have shown that the collapse of formal apartheid has not erased its powerful racist imprint on the psychic lives and subjectivities of South Africans.⁷⁷⁻⁷⁸ Memory of apartheid police brutality and its vestiges in contemporary South Africa plague the public's confidence in the South African Police Service. Reforming and restructuring the SAPS should be an ongoing effort, so that the Service's image and perception can improve to the point where co-operation in fighting crime between the police service and the public becomes fully entrenched in South Africa.

Conclusion

The ubiquity of crime has generated a plethora of criminological studies and theories that seek to explicate the underlying factors that engender crime, including socioeconomic disparities and biological theories of crime. This paper provides historical and critical contexts to explain the nature of extortion as a rampant crime in South Africa, particularly in South African townships. As we have argued, extortion thrives in these areas due to historical neglect and a lack of social infrastructure in townships that facilitate criminal activities. Inequality, historical and ongoing injustices, have been presented as co-constitutive of the reasons behind extortion crime in South African townships. Retail businesses (such as malls) and the construction industry face existential threats from extortion in townships because all the necessary social conditions, such as inadequate policing, poverty and inequality, illiteracy, etc., that facilitate criminal behaviour are present. It is, however, noteworthy that curtailing extortion is not intractable. A return to and a determined commitment to the 1994 national development strategy, which prioritised the erstwhile impoverished and excluded South Africans, is a critical step towards reducing extortion crime in South

⁷⁷ BOWMAN, B.; DUNCAN, N.; SONN, C. Towards a psychology of South Africa's histories—living with and through the apartheid archive. *South African Journal of Psychology*, v. 40, n. 4, p. 365-369, 2010.

⁷⁸ RAUCH, J. The South African Police and the Truth Commission. *South African Review of Sociology*, v. 36, n. 2, p. 208-237, 2005.

African townships. Addressing historical grievances may yield several benefits, including the erosion of community acceptance of and individual justification for criminal behaviour, the creation of opportunities that deter individuals from engaging in criminal enterprises, and the enhancement of confidence in the government.

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