

## **Shadows of fear: Extortion and protection racketeering amidst organized crime in South Africa**

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates organized crime networks that engage in extortion and protection racketeering in South Africa. Due to socio-economic hardships and weak institutional frameworks, criminals have employed fear and violence as a means to gain control over local communities and businesses illegally. The study employed a literature analysis of scholarly materials such as peer-reviewed journals, books, and reports by law enforcement agencies and nongovernmental organizations among others to gather knowledge on extortion and protection racketeering in organized crime in South Africa. The study examines the operational strategies and impacts of organised crime networks on extortion and protection racketeering on local economies as well as public safety. The findings review that there is an all-pervasive culture of fear which underlies blackmailing as well as racketeering activities thereby increasing the vulnerability of communities while undermining social cohesion. The paper concludes by recommending policies meant to improve law enforcement capability and community resilience against this threat on communities.

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**Keywords:** *Extortion, Organised crime, Protection racketeering, South Africa.*

### **1. Introduction**

Globally, organized criminality is a security threat that takes different forms across various regions (Martin, 2017; Maluleke & Dlamini, 2019). In South Africa, however several socio-economic factors have contributed significantly towards the establishment and growth of such cartels due to historical injustices coupled with weak institutional frameworks (Goga & Goredema, 2014). There are numerous forms of criminality in South Africa, however, extortion practices stand out for being particularly harmful thus affecting commercial viability besides upsetting societal harmony (Piemontese, 2023). Apartheid left deep-rooted inequalities resulting in poor living conditions and these conditions inadvertently allowed for expansion of organized crimes such as extortion and protection racketeering (Goga & Goredema, 2014). In present day South Africa's underworld illegal activities encompass a wide range of operations that include drug trade, and human trafficking. Extortion refers to a process where criminals forcefully extract money or valuable items from individuals or even businesses using violence or threat of harm (Piemontese, 2023). Conversely, this study focuses on protection racketeering in the South African context where criminals demand 'protection fees' under the disguise that they are protecting businesses or individuals from other members of the same criminal groups who would otherwise cause them harm.

### **2. Research Methodology**

This paper employed a qualitative literature review method. The study critically assessed various scholarly materials such as journals articles, books, and reports by law enforcement agencies and nongovernmental organizations among others to gather data on extortion and protection racketeering in organized crime in South Africa. The review employed a qualitative approach to harmonize data

about how gangs' modus operandi affect society, local communities, plus any anti-crime measures put in place. This paper identifies key themes and scrutinizes them with a view to understanding the socio-economic and political causes of criminality.

### 3. The Operations of Organized Crime Groups and the Extortion Rackets

Acts of intimidation, violence, and corruption are significantly evident in the operation of extortion and protection racketeering. In the South African context, these practices are embedded within local economies with criminal outfits taking over certain sectors such as mining and retail (De Villiers, 2013). Extortion and protection racketeering discourage investments hence contributing to economic instability at the local level, increasing operating costs for business entities while killing entrepreneurial spirit as a result of fear instilled by criminals (Pinotti, 2015). Organized crime groups are deeply rooted in extortion and protection racketeering that act as a major component to their criminal enterprise (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). When money or valuables are taken from people or companies through threats or intimidation under promises of preventing injury or ensuring security, it is referred to as extortion (Pinotti, 2015). This forceful practice usually takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of victims who may feel forced by the menace of violence or destruction to cooperate. These techniques are employed by organized crime groups in order to establish control over specific locations making it become an environment where fear and compliance seems normal (Grundling, 2013). Protection racket involves providing "security" against dangers that the criminals may have initiated themselves and it is extortionate in nature, operating on the basis of offering safety for money (Govender, 2015). This dubious protection is often paid for by victims as they avoid injury or loss which further consolidates criminals' grip over their territories (Slutzky & Zeume, 2020). The proceeds from these rackets are used to finance other criminal activities thereby making it a vicious cycle of dependency and fear (Seker & Yang, 2014). Through the active interplay between extortion and protection racketeering, organized crime still exists, perpetuating its effects on local communities by eroding trust in legitimate institutions and maintaining an atmosphere characterized by lawlessness.

#### 3.1. Mechanisms of Extortion

The mechanisms of extortion are complex and may include a blend of intimidation, manipulation, and coercion (Piemontese, 2020; Seker, & Yang, 2014). At its core, extortion uses threats and potential harm to extract money, valuables or services from victims (Olken, & Barron, 2009). Various tactics are used by organized crime groups to perpetuate fear among their targets thus ensuring that they remain under their control as individuals or entities (Gambetta, 1993). Potential targets are identified at this stage with selection being based on such factors as those perceived to be weak or having ability to meet demands made against them (Buonanno, Prarolo, & Vanin, 2016). In many cases extortionists make known their intentions after selecting their victims either through direct threats or indirect actions that amount to intimidations. There is one common method which is overt threat of violence; the threat can range from threatening the life of an individual or his property to indirect warnings about possible harm. Painful visions associated with creating terror in a victim facilitate compliance hence more likelihood that he will obey all what predator wants him to do in return for his life's security (UNODC, 2010). Moreover, others go ahead even destroying possessions just to demonstrate how serious they are while using power play approach (UNODC, 2010).

Moreover, psychological manipulation is another operational mechanism whereby extortionists put their victims under a sense of guilt or obligation (Asmundo, & Lisciandra, 2008). For example, extortion may be presented as repaying past favors or loyalty by targeting individuals or businesses who have previously been assisted by these gangsters in one way or another (Gambetta, 1993). The victim's conscience and feeling of obligation are targeted. This makes it difficult for the victim to decline payment without experiencing moral conflict and social stigma (Seker, & Yang, 2014). There are other methods that extortionists normally employ so as to avoid detection and prosecution which include opening front businesses and employing intermediaries to launder their money thereby making the

source of their money unclear (Asmundo, & Lisciandra, 2008). Through maintaining distance between themselves and direct act of extorting, lawbreakers avoid outright self-incrimination thus minimizing chances of being charged before law (Amodio, Choi, De Giorgi, & Rahman, 2022). Besides they may incorporate technological advances like encrypted communications and digital payments into their mode of operations while minimizing risks associated with such activities including interception by security agents. Further, by fostering a culture of fear and compliance within the community, the operational mechanisms of extortion are strengthened (Calderoni, 2011). Once they pay, victims are commonly threatened into silence and may be subjected to more intimidation in case they report this crime. The power of these extortionists increases as greater numbers of people or businesses fall prey to them thus making it harder for authorities to intervene and restore order. This systemic approach is responsible for not only sustaining the extortion racket but also eroding community cohesion and trust in legitimate institutions.

### *3.2. Interactions Between Criminal Groups and Victims*

The interactions between criminal groups and victims involve complex patterns of power dynamics, psychological manipulation, strategic coercion among others (Asmundo, & Lisciandra, 2008). To ensure complete control over their subjects and maximize resource extraction criminal groups exploit victim vulnerabilities taking advantage of every opportunity available. Investigations begin where suspects identify potential targets such as individuals, businesses or even whole communities seen as lucrative or easy preys (Alesina, Piccolo, & Pinotti, 2018). On various occasions criminals assert dominance through threats ranging from open aggression to subtle forms of emotional blackmail such as humiliation or constant harassment. Establishing a power imbalance favoring criminals is very important at this stage. Typically, when contact is made between a criminal group and its prey, there would be an element of force combined with some manipulative tactics on the defendant side.

Most times victims have no option other than obeying orders just because failure to do so implies immediate pain or loss (Buonanno, Prarolo, & Vanin, 2016). They can either be direct like physical violence or property damage or indirect like fear of getting a bad name in public eyes leading to financial breakdowns amongst others that should be employed by criminals against those who refuse cooperating with them towards achieving their goals which are always negative on their victims' sides (Asmundo, & Lisciandra, 2008). This will create some sense that whatever happens is unavoidable so that the victim can give in to the criminals. To make the matter worse, it is often a lot easier psychologically for one to just go along with what these people are demanding. The community often suffers from the erosion of trust between criminal gangs and their targets. Barone, and Narciso (2015) assert that Some victims may be coerced into silence, or they can be easily branded as being in collaboration with criminals and this makes them to lose confidence and even have no friends anymore. Victims are afraid to report a crime to the police because of different reasons including vengeance and social stigma. This only serves to strengthen the grip of these groups over their members which ironically should serve as a way to prevent and eliminate them on a continuous basis. Due to this, community bonds get weakened while violence persists unabatedly.

### *3.3. Broader Implications for Social and Economic Stability*

The broader implications of extortion and organized crime on social and economic stability are immense and widespread (Alexeev, Janeba, & Osborne, 2004; Barone, G. & Narciso, 2015). Extortion victims usually become isolated for fear of being attacked if they speak out (Calderoni, 2011). This disintegration of trust can result in the disintegration of community cohesion as people start to be cautious about one another thus not ready to engage in public activities or support each other. Furthermore, criminal groups' terror and anxiety may increase social disunity whereby, people avoid public spaces while community ties start to weaken. Extortion also places significant burdens on businesses and local economies. Barone, & Narciso, 2015) assert that paying extortionate demands by businesses can prove costly thus depriving them resources that would have been channeled towards

legal operations and investments. Such financial constraints could lead to high prices for goods and services, reduced profitability, even close down of business entities. Furthermore, extortions presence may cause potential investors to back out leading to economic stagnation as a result of perceiving unstable or unsafe environment hence discouraging investment or entrepreneurial activity. This may prevent economic growth as well as job creation which further worsens poverty & inequality levels amid affected societies.

Similarly, local governance structures and public institutions suffer from the effects of extortions significantly (Buonanno, Prarolo, & Vanin, 2016). Most times such criminal groups seeking for protection will corrupt or subvert local authorities into maintaining their criminal activities (Amodio, et al., 2022). Consequently, they lead to law enforcement systems that are weak hence incapable addressing crimes effectively neither preventing them adequately like before. Public institutions lose credibility thereby reducing citizens' participation in public affairs besides diminishing their trust for government itself. The impact of extortion on local governance and public institutions is also significant (Amodio, Choi, De Giorgi, & Rahman, 2022). Criminal gangs practicing blackmail often seek to bribe or undermine district officials while upholding its operations. This graft may weaken legal enforcement systems plus courts hence reducing their capability to handle crimes appropriately or even prevent them effectively. The lack of confidence in public institutions has resulted in low levels of civic participation as well as loss of trust by the public in governance. This corruption and inefficiency can perpetuate a cycle of criminal activity and hinder efforts to restore stability and security.

Public health and safety are severely affected by extortion and organized crime. Psychological effects on the persons' mental status are caused by an environment created with fear as well as intimidation from extortionists leading anxiety, depression, trauma among other psychological issues that they face (Olken, & Barron, 2009).. Currently, this includes physical violence which is used alongside other tactics by criminal groups thereby inflicting harm on lives while increasing violence risks within the society. Besides, if public resources like health care systems plus emergency services continue to be strained then negative impacts on public health coupled with safety will only intensify further. In general, the larger implications of extortions and organized crime do not stop at immediate financial or social consequences but have cascading effects on different facets of community life (Calderoni, 2011). Thus, it follows that broken social trust, economic instability, governance failures and compromised public health require us to act urgently through addressing this menace by all means possible. Effective interventions must involve strengthening law enforcement, promoting economic resilience, and fostering community solidarity to mitigate the extensive damage caused by these criminal activities and restore stability.

### *3.4. Political Instability and Governance Challenges*

The presence of organized crimes such as extortion generally worsens political instabilities alongside governance challenges (Alexeev, Janeba & Osborne, 2004). Mostly these organized groups will try influencing or corrupting political processes via extortion activities policies that lead to weakening democratic setups & rule of law due pressure upon politicians who result in favouring criminals themselves (Alesina, Piccolo, & Pinotti, 2018). Consequently, this leads to governance structure that has been undermined in terms policy making procedures shaped around needs for crime rather than addressing people's requirements. Public faith in governance can be rapidly broken when politicians or public officers are accused of corruption or thought to be under the influence of criminal organizations (Calderoni, 2011). Government initiatives fail to gain ground as a result of this lack of faith that therefore leads to widespread disinterest in politics. Consequently, people lose trust for their leaders who they may not participate in democracy anymore and as such these causes further damage by weakening the fabric of governance leading political apathy or unrest.

Moreover, organized crime groups frequently exploit political instability as an opportunity to extend their power base and activities (Seker, & Yang, 2014). Criminal groups often take advantage of weak or compromised governance systems to infiltrate and co-opt various sectors including law

enforcement and judicial systems (Slutzky & Zeume, 2020). This creates a vicious circle whereby corrupt practices and inefficiency make it difficult for authorities to address crime problems and restore normalcy (Piemontese, 2020). The difficulty encountered while implementing effective law enforcement and justice reforms at places affected by organized crimes is also a manifestation on how challenging it is to improve governance. Those entrusted with enforcing existing laws may end up blocking the fight against crime through bribery and other means (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). Corruption within the police department or judiciary makes investigations stagnant delaying justice making criminals go scot-free without punishment which again prolongs criminal activities itself but also further diminishes capacity for security provision by the state according to rule.

### 3.5. Community Resilience and Social Dynamics

Organized crime and extortion can best be addressed through community resilience and social dynamics (Asmundo, & Lisciandra, 2008). Resilience is the capability of a community to adapt, recover and prosper despite problems like criminal activities or social disturbance. Therefore, resilient communities are those with strong social networks, effective local leadership and collective problem-solving capacities. Alesina, Piccolo, & Pinotti, (2018) asserts that communities can better withstand the pressures imposed by criminal elements and work together to restore stability and security. Strength of social networks as well as interpersonal relations is a key component of community resilience. Communities with strong bonds among their members such that they have trust in each other are better able handle external threats including organized crimes. There should be social ties between members so that they can act collectively against any criminal activity. By promoting solidarity and mutual aid within the community, individuals not only cope with the immediate effects of crime but also mobilize themselves for common resistance against criminals' manipulations.

Community resilience also depends on effective local leadership (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). The fight against organized crime can be won through the contribution of leaders who are participative, honest and working in the interest of their people. These individuals may campaign for resource allocation, constitute community-centered projects, as well as creating strong ties with police and other players in the system (Buonanno, Prarolo & Vanin, 2016). Their honesty coupled with their incredible feeling for society can help to establish trust amongst people and a sense of cooperation needed to deal with criminality and enhance general life in communities. (Buonanno, Prarolo, & Vanin, 2016). The resilience of communities and their social dynamics are also significantly enhanced by the latter. Programs aimed at youth development, education, as well as economic opportunities can tackle some root causes of crime and extortion. Fueling criminal behavior among community members especially young people could therefore be addressed through various ways providing positive outlets and opportunities for individuals. This includes initiatives that encourage community engagement or civic participation thus enabling citizens to take charge in shaping their environment and addressing any challenges encountered. Eventually, nurturing community resilience requires an all-inclusive strategy that takes into account both societal aspects and physical infrastructure. Apart from strengthening social networks and leadership skills, it also entails addressing underlying problems such as poverty, inequality, and limited access to resources. Tackling these issues holistically gives communities a good start towards long-term stability against organized crime hence creating a more supportive ground. Communities who adopt a proactive approach can therefore better deal with crimes while improving the quality of life.

In particular; urban environments represent an ideal case study to study the effects of extortion on people's lives (Seker & Yang, 2014). The socio-economic landscape of many African cities like Johannesburg in South Africa is marked by such activities whereby densely populated areas have diverse economic activities that have far reaching implications for local economies and community stability. Therefore, most enterprises tend to concentrate in them with diverse economic activities encouraging other forms of businesses like organized crime (Piemontese, 2020). This makes them prime targets for protection racketeering and extortion since they are full of valuable assets concentrated within a small

area. Large businesses often have extensive security measures but SMEs operate with very little if any security measures; hence making them susceptible to this form of exploitation. When small business owners refuse to pay protection fees, they run the risk of being charged exorbitantly causing an increase in operational costs or even closure. The city's economy may stagnate due to reduced investment thus hampering productivity.

### 3.6. Law Enforcement and Governance Challenges

Issues concerning law enforcement are closely related with those relating governance found particularly in areas that are affected by organized crimes as well as corruption (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). These protective strategies are critical in maintaining public safety and upholding the rule of law but can eventually be undermined when criminal groups infiltrate or corrupt police and judicial systems. Cases of inconsistent enforcement, corrupted investigations and lack of trust from the public relating to policing agencies would lead to public mistrust (Slutzky, & Zeume, 2020). Such corruption serves not only to prevent crime being addressed but also maintain an environment where criminals act with impunity. Consequentially it leads to a disintegrated justice system hence increased insecurity within the society. The law enforcement effectiveness is more complicated by governance challenges that foster political instability and corruption. When politicians or public officers are engaged in or affected by organized crime, their capacity to craft and implement effective policies becomes handicapped (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). That kind of interruption may result in weak regulatory frameworks, lack of support for law enforcement agencies, and a general collapse of governance.

### 3.7. Community Responses and Resilience

To deal with organized crimes' effects as well as improve societal stability altogether, community responses and resilience become very important (Grundling, 2013). Communities often use various strategies against crime including grassroots organizing up to local advocacy as well as community-based safety programs (Maluleke, & Dlamini, 2019). By building strong social networks and promoting collaborative action, communities can unite into one force against criminal activities (Goga, & Goredema, 2014). These initiatives could consist of neighborhood watch programs, community forums or partnerships with local authorities; all serve to create a stronger sense of security as well as collective efficacy (De Villiers, 2013). The immediate impact of such responses is twofold: mitigating crime's consequences on the one hand; on the other hand helping protect future generations from suffering similar experiences through enhancing social cohesion within society (Goga, & Goredema, 2014). Resilience within a community is further bolstered by proactive engagement and the development of support systems. Programs focusing on youth engagement, economic development, and mental health provision can address some underlying causes of criminality (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). Education opportunities among others provided throughout the jurisdictions through different channels like private individuals, NGOs or local government help reduce attraction towards illegal acts while improving circumstances around a person. Another factor contributing to this resilience is when communities have access to resources from outside actors that include non-governmental organizations and governments at federal state level. Responding effectively with immediate challenges is not enough, but communities also need capacity to grow and adapt through all the adversities of life.

Rural contexts are unique case studies for understanding extortion and protection racketeering due to their distinct socio-economic and environmental characteristics (Goga, & Goredema 2014). Rural areas such as the Limpopo Province in South Africa demonstrate how these criminal activities find root within rural areas, thus underscoring the intricate relationship between organized crime and rural communities (Martin, 2017). Such rural areas have less opportunities for economic sustenance than the urban centers that include government services like water supply, sewerage lines, roads among other things. This isolation makes businesses in rural settings more susceptible to blackmail or threat-for-profit schemes. These criminals take advantage of weak law enforcement coverage as well as limited financial resilience of rural populations (Goga, & Goredema, 2014). The relative isolation and lack of

security measures often make agricultural enterprises, small businesses, and informal sectors easy targets of such networks. The situation is worsened by the demands made on them by extortionists who charge a levy for providing protection against other criminals. Rural based businesses are burdened with additional money problems associated with taxation; that may hinder development while contributing to poverty cycles.

### *3.8. Socio-Economic and Demographic Factors in the Rural Areas*

Most times, poverty levels in South Africa's rural areas are high; this has resulted into their vulnerability to criminal activities (Maluleke, & Dlamini, 2019). People can either be sucked into these criminal networks by economic desperation or become docile victims of such activities. Demographics factors like poor education and fewer job opportunities may hamper the capacity of the people living in the countryside from effectively opposing or responding to acts of criminality. This demographic vulnerability makes rural areas particularly susceptible to organized crime's exploitation (Martin, 2017).

### *3.9. Economic Impact on Businesses*

For businesses, being extorted and paying protection fees is a huge drain on finances Barone, G & Narciso, G. (2015). Extorted companies suffer increased operational costs as they are forced to pay for protection or give ransoms (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). Profitability and business continuity can be seriously affected due to this financial burden. SMEs, which often have limited financial capacity, are more prone to this situation. Extra costs of security payments or the potential liability for damages or losses from shakedown may contribute towards company closures, lower investments and strangled economies (Barone, & Narciso, 2015). Moreover, organizations that refuse the demands of racketeering may experience acts such as thefts, vandalism and violent attacks by criminals. Besides immediate monetary losses, these crimes could undermine the reputation of any firm in future discouraging investors from its stock while creating an insecure environment that hampers economic activity.

### *3.10. Effects on Community Development*

The impact of organized crime and extortion on community development is extensive and divergent. Firstly, organized crime tends to discourage investment while stifling entrepreneurship thereby hindering economic growth in many ways (Grundling, 2013). Consequently, crime related costs faced by firms that receive extortion threats or operate in fear may divert resources away from productive activities and investments (Martin, 2017). This results in higher prices for goods and services leading to reduced profitability and ultimately business closure. Also, there's no job creation due stagnating economic growth thus residents stay within their low-income earning brackets thereby perpetuating poverty cycles within the community.

Similarly, organized criminality affects social cohesion undermining efforts aimed at building a united very society with a lot of trust among stakeholders involved in it (Martin, 2017). A good example is where fear increases among residents as they engage themselves into different types of criminal activities including extortion making it difficult for strong networking among counties to come up. Therefore, lack of trust weakens social bonds while reducing participation rates by society hence complicating developmental programs set forth by communities which tend not sustain properly if not brought together (Govender, 2015). All these hinderances make collective actions against communal challenges harder since locals become isolated or fearful of anti- social practices and hence reducing their effectiveness in tackling problems that the community may face over time.

## **4. Conclusion**

In a conclusion, a multi-faceted and integrated approach combining strong law enforcement, community involvement, economic empowerment and policy reform is necessary to address them extortion and racketeering. For example, strengthening law enforcement agencies together with judicial systems are very important in effectively combating extortion and protection racketeering. The capacity

of authorities against organized crime could be improved through enhanced training resources allocation process coupled with anti-corruption measures. Such interventions become more effective when different agencies collaborate across jurisdictions. Building resilience and offering victim support would not be possible without community engagement. Some collective actions may also be taken by empowering local communities via awareness campaigns, support services along with community led initiatives thereby mitigating the influence exerted by organized crime groups.

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