



# Politicising violent gangs in selected Southern African countries: a comparative review of violent crime

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the politicisation and violence associated with criminal gangs in three Southern African countries. A qualitative meta-synthesis of sixty reputable articles from scholarly databases, including Science Direct, SAGE, Google Scholar, Scopus, EBSCOhost, and Taylor & Francis, reveals that gangs emerged from socioeconomic disparities, marginalisation, and weak governance in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. Criminal gangs have evolved into powerful entities due to their entanglement with political structures, influencing governance, security, and the economy. Corruption, state-sponsored violence, and political manipulation sustain their existence, aided by economic marginalisation, persistent poverty, widespread youth unemployment, and illicit economies like drug trafficking and illegal mining. Many gangs function as political tools, orchestrating electoral violence, controlling resources, and territorial disputes, blurring crime and political activism. Their activities destabilise communities, erode trust in institutions, and hinder economic development. Gang power is reinforced by selective law enforcement, political patronage, and corruption in security agencies, rendering conventional policing ineffective. Combating gang violence requires policy measures beyond militarised crackdowns; community policing, restorative justice, and social reintegration programmes can mitigate gang influence and decrease their exploitation by political actors. Without broad reform, criminal-political networks will continue to threaten state legitimacy and regional stability.

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## Introduction

Violent crime remains a critical challenge across African nations, with far-reaching implications beyond immediate casualties and property destruction (Mahaye & Ajani, 2023; Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). The Southern African countries analysed in this study, including South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, face significant challenges from the rise of criminal gangs. These groups propagate violence, disrupt societal order and entrench themselves within political and economic institutions (Lessing, 2021; Muti & Salvucci, 2024; Wahman & Goldring, 2020). These countries were selected for their diverse gang dynamics and structures: South Africa's urban gangs and political links, Mozambique's drug trafficking and artisanal mining and Zimbabwe's politicised gangs used in election violence and intimidation. This allowed the study to explore a nuanced understanding of factors that promote gang violence and the underlying political dynamics. These gangs thrive in environments characterised by rapid urbanisation, inequality, youth unemployment and weakened state institutions, creating a complex nexus between criminality, governance and social disintegration (Eyita-Okon, 2022; Ojewale, 2024). This review examines how socio-economic and political factors contribute to the rise and politicisation of criminal gangs in these countries.

Colonialism and the legacies of apartheid have significantly influenced gang development in the Southern Africa region. In South Africa, racial segregation and forced removals have contributed to

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poverty and marginalisation in townships, creating environments where gangs such as the '28s' and 'Hard Livings' have emerged and evolved into organised criminal networks (Kelly & Ward, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2024). In addition, racial segregation, youth unemployment and poverty reportedly spurred gang formation, while the breakdown of communal ties in poor neighbourhoods signifies a lack of structural control, prompting gangs to fill the void, creating a subculture and offering marginalised youth a sense of belonging and economic opportunity. In Zimbabwe, colonial land dispossession and inequality fuelled poverty and unemployment, fostering politically affiliated gangs like the 'Green Bombers'. The absence of effective community institutions has also enabled the growth of politically motivated gangs. (Rwodzi, 2024). In Mozambique, colonial resource exploitation and the ensuing civil war have led to a fragile state that struggles to maintain law and order. Gangs such as the 'Jovens' have exploited weak governmental institutions to control international drug trafficking routes and local illegal industries like timber and artisanal mining (Ewi et al., 2022).

Unlike South Africa and Zimbabwe, gang operations in Mozambique are closely tied to global criminal networks, emphasising the importance of local and international factors in sustaining organised crime. However, like its neighbours, gang activity in Mozambique is driven by a lack of economic opportunities and systemic government deficiencies. A similar trend emerges across all these countries: gangs are integrated into political processes (Cronje, 2024). In South Africa, political leaders often integrated gangs to achieve electoral dominance, particularly in townships and urban areas, where they exploited their influence over local populations. (Brankovic et al., 2020; Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023; Maringira and Gukurume 2020; Mlambo & Masuku, 2022; Owusu, 2024; Sambo, 2022). In Zimbabwe, the politicisation of gangs is increasingly evident; gangs function as agents of political repression, imposing the will of governing elites through intimidation and violence (Rwodzi, 2024). Although gangs are less likely to be directly manipulated for political purposes in Mozambique, corruption within law enforcement and government institutions fosters their operations. (Sambo, 2022).

The research is set to answer the following question: How do socio-economic disparities and political dynamics shape the emergence, operations and politicisation of violent gangs in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe? The politicisation of criminal gangs has far-reaching consequences, exacerbating social inequality, destabilising communities and undermining state authority, all of which contribute to cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. While a substantial body of literature exists on gang violence within individual Southern African nations, a significant gap remains in comparative scholarship that synthesises these diverse manifestations. This paper addresses this gap by offering a cross-national analysis of the political economy of gangs in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In doing so, it moves beyond country-specific case studies to identify overarching regional dynamics and divergent trajectories.

## Theoretical framework

This review is grounded in social disorganisation and strain theories, providing a framework for a nuanced understanding of the emergence and persistence of gang activity in these selected countries. The social disorganisation perspective posits that the breakdown of social structures, weakened community networks, social control, rapid urbanisation and inadequate policing measures frequently create environments conducive to crime and gang formation (Jones, 2020; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Williams, 2022). However, the 'breakdown of social structures' should not be seen as a generic failure, but as a direct consequence of colonial distortion of pre-existing, functional community ties and value systems. The void that gangs fill is not merely one of governance but also of meaning and identity. Typically, gang structures foster criminal opportunities by developing essential skills, networks and methods to identify and access criminal markets, thereby maintaining their activities (Webster et al., 2006). The emergence and sustainability of gangs highlights the inadequate control systems of urban centres, which stem from weak governance, ineffective law enforcement and insecurity, thereby fostering the dominance of gang 'reign', particularly in neighbourhoods plagued by systemic issues.

The rise of criminal gangs in the selected countries has evolved from localised crime to politically motivated violence, significantly impacting societal stability and state legitimacy (Ejiofor, 2022). Gangs

integrate into governance structures for political goals, as evidenced across these nations. In South Africa, the number gangs like 26s, 27s and 28s have a strong network in criminal activities. Gang 26 focuses on economic crimes, Gang 27s, or 'blood gangs', enforce rules and Gang 28s, known as the 'Warrior gang', comprise senior members from other gangs notorious for violence and sexual coercion. The Hard Livings gang operates in street crime, involved in drug trafficking, protection rackets and community crimes. The 'Americans,' a street gang linking smaller gangs with ties to the Sicilian mafia, also emerged from systemic issues and segregation, becoming tools for political elites to manipulate votes and suppress dissent in impoverished urban areas like Cape Flats and Soweto (Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023). Social disorganisation theory explains this, showing that gangs emerge as social structures weaken, especially as poverty intensifies (Jones, 2020; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Gang expansion in these countries is rooted in the breakdown of state authority and corruption (Jones, 2020; Shaw & McKay, 1942), thriving in regions with weak policing, such as Cabo Delgado Province (Sithole, 2022). While direct political control may be less overt than in South Africa and Zimbabwe, the absence of state oversight and economic opportunity creates fertile ground for gang activity.

Strain theory posits that illegal behaviour is driven by limited access to legitimate opportunities due to systemic crises (Agnew, 2015). The theory posits that when individuals experience stress and frustration, referred to as strain, it can provoke negative emotions. These powerful negative feelings create a need to find an outlet or a coping mechanism. If individuals lack access to legal or socially acceptable ways to manage these emotions, they may turn to criminal behaviour as a means of coping. 'Strain' within the context of this study highlights the specific tension of post-colonial life: the conflict between the promise of modern capitalism and the reality of exclusion, alongside the loss of traditional social safety nets. Gangs, in this light, are not merely a response to poverty, but a rational choice for youth caught between two worlds, belonging fully to neither. A breakdown in law and order ensues from the state's inaction regarding these issues and the gangs' militarisation (Machakanja & Manuel, 2021). The Green Bombers and Machete in Zimbabwe emerged from the political economy crisis, particularly in the extractive industry, polarising the country's social structure across interest groups. Mkodzongi, 2020). These gangs have reportedly been linked to the ruling ZANU-PF and have been utilised for political repression during elections. (Rwodzi, 2024). The lack of economic opportunities and the state's failure to address social injustice nourish gang growth and spread, destabilising the political landscape (Vigil, 2020). Mozambique presents a similar scenario where gangs (Jovens) exploit weak governmental institutions and corruption for criminal activities such as drug trafficking and artisanal mining (Ewi et al., 2022).

## Methodology

This study employed a comparative review and synthesis approach to analyse and integrate existing literature on gangs and criminality in the countries under study, emphasising traditional and emergent perspectives on 'violent gangs'. This research methodology was adopted to identify trends, explore the effectiveness of violent gang strategies and consolidate findings on the security challenges prevalent in the three countries being studied. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks such as Social Disorganisation and strain theories were used to contextualise and deepen the understanding of gang dynamics and their politicisation in these countries.

## Article selection and eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria were determined using the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes and Study (PICOS) framework, which ensures a thorough and targeted review (Amir-Behghadami & Janati, 2020). This framework provided clear guidance for the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1) of studies relevant to the review. The period from 2005 to 2024 marked a crucial time frame during which significant shifts in gang-related activity and regional security dynamics occurred across these countries. This period witnessed the emergence of new gang structures and the evolution of strategies, particularly in response to changes in the socio-political landscape, economic hardships and technological advancements (Ngoveni et al., 2024; Rwodzi, 2024).

**Table 1.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Description	Inclusion	Exclusion
Focus of study	Studies examining violence specific to criminal gangs and their operations in selected Southern African countries.	Studies not connected to criminal gangs and violence linked to their activities, as well as their politicisation in Southern Africa.
Geographical setting	South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.	Other countries besides the selected ones.
Type of study	Peer-reviewed articles, books and monographs. Reputable reports were also considered.	Blogs, opinion sites, non-peer-reviewed articles and predatory journal articles. Studies which lack empirical insights or irrelevant designs (e.g. those not suitable for a meta-synthesis or comparative review).
Thematic relevance	Socio-political dimension of crimes and gang violence.	Content unrelated to the study's focus on the politicisation of gangs.
Time frame	Studies published between 2005 and 2024.	Studies published before 2005 or lacking relevance to contemporary issues on violent groups and their criminality.
Language	Articles published in English.	Articles in languages other than English.
Relevance to the politicisation of violent groups: contexts	Reporting of measurable gang-related outcomes. Regional-focused Studies pertinent to gang violence.	Studies without sufficient or relevant data for the study's objectives. Duplicate Publication: Any duplicate records identified during the screening process.

Authors' construction (2025).

### **Data sources and searches**

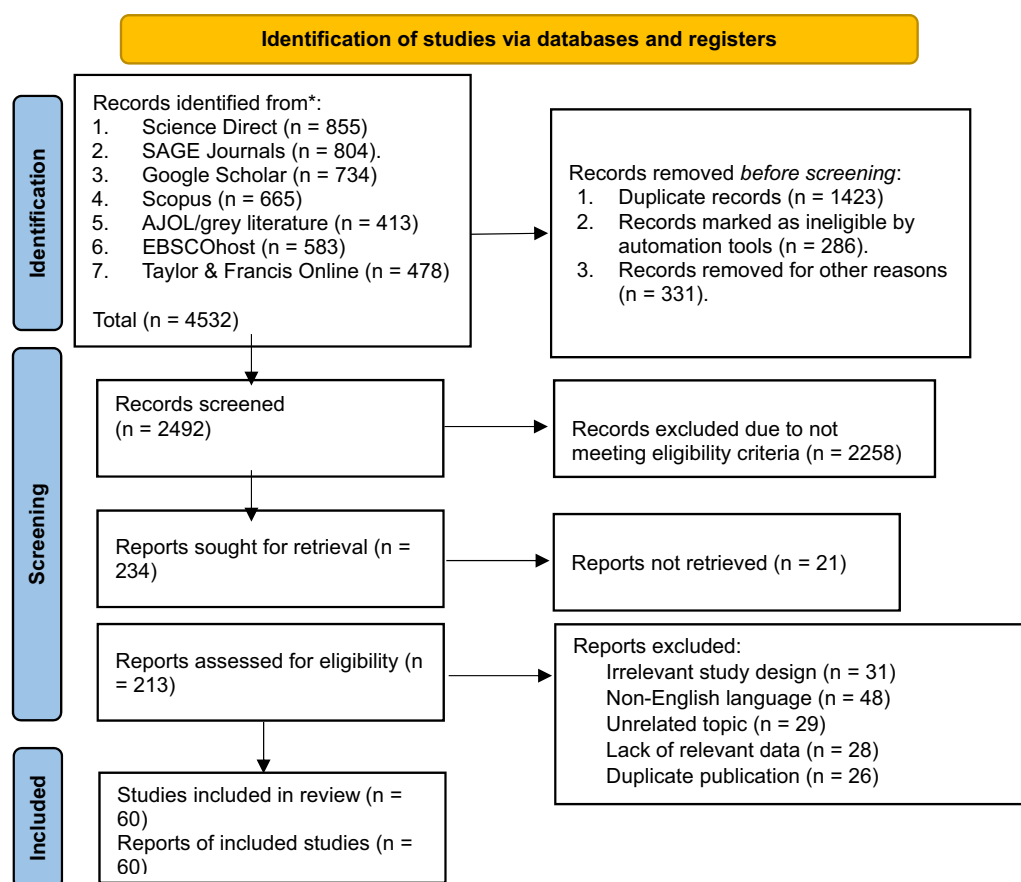
A multi-disciplinary search strategy was employed across several databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar and SAGE, which collectively provided extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals, policy reports and relevant grey literature. The selected studies and publications were pertinent to gang violence within the region. Grey literature sources, including policy reports, government documents and NGO publications, were sourced from reputable government agency databases and subjected to rigorous quality checks to ensure the reliability of the data. This process included validating their credibility and cross-verifying findings with peer-reviewed studies. The quality assessment criteria encompass relevance, currency, transparent methodology and objectivity. The search strategy incorporated Boolean operators to target and retrieve literature pertinent to the defined themes. The search was guided by a set of carefully chosen keywords, including the following: ('gang violence' OR 'criminal gangs' OR 'gang culture') AND ('Southern Africa' OR 'South Africa' OR 'Zimbabwe' OR 'Mozambique') AND ('political manipulation' OR 'government corruption' OR 'political violence') ('economic drivers of gang violence' OR 'resource competition' OR 'poverty and crime') AND ('Southern Africa' OR 'Africa') AND ('violence gang' OR 'organised crime') ('gang violence' OR 'criminal activity' OR 'gang culture') AND ('societal impact' OR 'community safety' OR 'social cohesion') AND ('Southern Africa' OR 'South Africa') ('militarisation of police forces' OR 'policing strategies' OR 'community policing') AND ('gang violence' OR 'criminal gangs') AND ('Southern Africa') Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used to narrow or broaden search results and refine the focus on specific countries, such as South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

### **Study selection process**

The study selection process adhered to the PRISMA guideline as contextualised by Page, Moher, Bossuyt, Boutron, Hoffmann, Mulrow, & McKenzie (2021). Initial searches from databases revealed 4532 articles (see [Appendix A](#)); after further refinement, 1354 were retained. Screening resulted in the selection of 622 full-text articles. Further evaluation led to the final selection of 60 articles (see table in [Appendix B](#)), which were analysed in this review (see [Figure 1](#)).

### **Data extraction**

A standardised data extraction procedure was implemented to ensure data accuracy and uniformity across all studies. Key details were systematically captured, including the author, year, study design, methodology, results (focusing on equity, sustainability and community impact), findings and



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flowcharts of the studies screening. *Source:* Authors' construction (2025).

limitations. The inclusion criteria comprised publication dates (2005–2024), peer-reviewed status, an emphasis on the socio-political dimension of organised crime, and the reporting of measurable gang-related outcomes. An independent reviewer conducted regular data assessments to enhance the reliability of the results. Cross-referencing and literature consultation were utilised to resolve ambiguities. The Evaluation Tool for Quantitative and Qualitative Research Studies (Long & Godfrey, 2004) was employed to assess the included studies. This tool encompasses major evaluation areas common to qualitative and quantitative research and has been refined to integrate criteria relating to politicisation and internally violent gangs.

## Results

This section presents the synthesised findings from the 60 reviewed articles (presented in [Appendix B](#)), outlining the dynamics of violent gangs in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The results are organised to first identify the specific gangs prevalent in each nation, with a summary of their characteristics, criminal activities and sustaining factors. Following this overview, the analysis is structured around six key themes that emerged from the literature. These themes, illustrated (see [Figure 2](#)), provide a comprehensive framework for exploring how socio-economic disparities and political factors contribute to the emergence and politicisation of criminal gangs in the countries studied. Each theme was discussed in detail in the subsequent subsections.

[Table 2](#) describes gangs in the selected countries reviewed. South Africa's well-established gangs, like the Numbers Gang, dominate underworlds and are linked to regional drug and prison networks, involved in serious crimes due to deep roots and socio-economic factors. Mozambique's urban gangs, such as Maputo and Shiboka, are increasingly influential in drug trafficking and mining, connected to



**Figure 2.** Themes and sub-themes of the study. *Source:* Authors' construction (2025).

**Table 2.** Summary of violent gangs in the countries of study.

Country	Gangs	International/regional links	Formidability and longevity	Crimes perpetrated	Sustaining factors
South Africa	Numbers Gang (28s, 26s, Hard Livings, etc.)	Linked to regional drug trafficking networks and prison systems in Southern Africa.	Notorious for control of Cape Town's and Gauteng's underworld, deeply embedded in the prison system with decades-long influence.	Drug trafficking, extortion, murder, gang wars and political manipulation.	Strong hierarchical structure, influence within prison systems, poverty and socio-economic exclusion.
Mozambique	Urban gangs and groups like Maputo gangs and Shiboka are involved in drug trafficking and artisanal mining.	Linked to international drug trade routes, particularly for cocaine and heroin trafficking.	Formidable due to control over key illicit trade routes, influence is growing in urban areas and mining regions.	Drug trafficking, illegal mining and extortion in mining regions.	Weak border controls, a thriving illicit economy and poor governance.
Zimbabwe	Green Bombers (youth militia).	Politically motivated; linked to ruling political parties for regional voter manipulation.	Longstanding presence due to state backing, particularly during elections.	Political violence, voter intimidation and destruction of opposition property.	State sponsorship, political agendas, unemployment and manipulation of ethnic tensions.

*Source:* Authors' construction (2025).

international routes and exploiting weak governance. Zimbabwe's politically motivated Green Bombers, backed by the state, have a long history of political violence and intimidation, fuelled by political agendas and unemployment.

This review (see Figure 2) explores six key themes and their related sub-themes to analyse gang violence and its implications in these Southern African countries. The historical and socio-political context examines the colonial legacy, post-colonial governance, motivations behind gang formation and the nature of criminal gangs. Political dynamics include corruption, weak governance, state-sponsored gangs and their strategies for political mobilisation. Economic drivers evaluate the role of illicit economies, inequality, unemployment and poverty in influencing gang violence. The societal impact reflects the effects on social stability, security threats and economic disruption. Cultural and social factors investigate identity, youth culture and the narratives that shape gang affiliations, while government responses concentrate on law enforcement strategies and alternative approaches to addressing gang violence.

## Historical and socio-political context of gangs in Southern Africa

The political and historical context of Southern Africa plays a significant role in the emergence and continued existence of organised crime groups across the region. Colonial history left indelible imprints on the region's social structures, governance and economic systems. At the same time, post-colonial administrations have frequently struggled to address systemic inequalities and violence, providing fertile ground for the formation of violent gangs. While each nation presents a unique trajectory shaped by its specific colonial and post-colonial experiences, several overarching themes emerge, illustrating a regional dynamic in which political actors have consistently instrumentalised organised violence for strategic purposes. The evolution of these groups from non-political entities to extensions of state or opposition power, and their subsequent fusion with transnational criminal enterprises, forms the core of this shared history. Table 3 provides a summary of the findings from the literature, which are presented and discussed through several sub-themes.

### The foundation, early origins and colonial roots of politicised gang violence

From Table 3, the key theme across the three nations is how colonialism has shaped the socio-political conditions that contribute to violence. In South Africa, socio-economic deprivation, rapid urbanisation and discriminatory policing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries spurred early gangs like the Ninevites and tsotsis (Jensen, 2010). These gangs responded to hardships from apartheid, while state police often ignored township violence, creating a gap that gangs filled, sometimes with community support. Prison gang subcultures, such as the number gangs, also originated then, rooted in anti-colonial ideas (Kynoch, 2005).

In Zimbabwe, the colonial system was explicitly founded on 'conquest, violence, police rule, militarism and authoritarianism', establishing a governing model that the post-independence state would later adopt and strengthen. The earliest urban gangs in colonial Rhodesia were not primarily criminal, but rather 'competitive youth associations' involved in generational and cultural disputes. The 1929 'faction fights' in Bulawayo were mostly conflicts over urban culture and social identity (Alexander & McGregor,

**Table 3.** Summary of historical trajectory and socio-political context of gangs in countries under review.

Sub-themes	South Africa	Zimbabwe	Mozambique
Colonial roots	Emerged from socio-economic deprivation and discriminatory policing of apartheid.	The colonial system established a model of violence and authoritarianism, creating a 'continuum of political violence'.	N/A
Politicisation/instrumentalisation of gangs	Apartheid state-sponsored gangs attacked ANC supporters. The SAP was deeply implicated in township conflicts.	ZANU-PF institutionalised the use of quasi-militias and youth 'foot-soldiers'.	The FRELIMO government labelled social deviants as 'enemies of the revolution'.
Blurring political and criminal motives	'Com-tsotsis' blurred lines in the 1980s; the post-apartheid era saw fusion with international crime syndicates.	Contemporary machete gangs act as political 'foot-soldiers' for elites in gold cartels while engaging in violent crime.	ASWJ combines socio-economic grievances with radical Islamist ideology.
Role of liberation movements and opposition	ANC and Inkatha recruited criminal gangs during the township wars.	Opposition MDC adopted violent tactics with its 'Vanguard' youth paramilitary group.	RENAMO evolved into a politicised rebel movement using brutal tactics for political ends.
Post-conflict persistence	Disillusioned ex-combatants turned to crime; former gang members struggled to adapt to peace.	N/A	Governance vacuums led to the rise of predatory community policing groups; RENAMO returned to armed conflict.
Nature and motivations of gangs	Gangs like the Numbers Gang emerged for economic survival and resistance; organised, hierarchical structures dominate	Gangs like the Green Bombers are politically motivated, functioning as tools for political control alongside criminal activities like smuggling.	Urban gangs in Windhoek are focused on petty crime and trafficking due to weak governance.
Notable examples	Numbers Gang, Tsotsi gangs—known for drug trafficking, extortion and urban crime.	Green Bombers, Mashurugwi—involved in political violence, illegal mining and election intimidation.	Sabotage and Jovens dominate informal power brokers in areas with limited state control.

Source: Authors' construction (2025).

2013). This is an early attempt by young people to forge a new social order in the disruptive environment of the colonised communities. These were not just 'gangs-in-training'; they were a response to being uprooted from traditional structures and an attempt to establish new rules for a new reality. By the 1960s, 'Zhii riots', urban violence had become clearly 'class-based', targeting the property of White Rhodesians, wealthy Africans amid grievances over mass unemployment and poor living conditions (Ngwenya, 2017).

### ***Politicisation/instrumentalisation of gangs***

From Table 3, a recurring theme from the study is the state's role in encouraging gangs for political goals. During apartheid in South Africa, the state engaged in promoting gangs for political or financial reasons, supporting criminal groups to target ANC supporters in townships. (Kynoch, 2005). Police corruption also fuelled gang violence, with officers supplying weapons and protecting informants (Greenspan, 2024). The South African Police (SAP) was 'deeply implicated in the various township conflicts', actively encouraging and sponsoring well-known criminals in campaigns against ANC supporters. A similar situation in Zimbabwe, the ruling ZANU-PF party is noted to have embraced violence as a legitimate tool of statecraft, building on the colonial Leviathan with 'governance by military operations' (Moyo, 2020). After independence, ZANU-PF institutionalised the use of quasi-militias as an extension of its coercive power. ZANU youths acted as 'party foot-soldiers' during the Gukurahundi atrocities (1982–1987) (Nyere, 2016). War veterans and youth militias were deployed to violently seize land and intimidate opposition voters during the 'Third Chimurengam' and various elections (Moyo, 2020), operating with state sanction in operations like *Murambatsvina* (2005) and *Makavhotera Papi* (2008) (Alexander & McGregor, 2013).

### ***Blurring of criminal and political activities***

Across all the selected countries, the distinctions between political and criminal activities have increasingly blurred over time. In South Africa during the 1980s, the escalating conflict between the ANC, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the state led to a situation where criminal and political actions became intertwined, as seen with the 'com-tsotsis' (Greenspan, 2024). Post-apartheid, the arrival of international crime syndicates and a growing drug trade further merged criminal enterprises with existing gang structures (Maringira & Masiya, 2018). In modern Zimbabwe, machete gangs are highly politicised, acting as 'foot-soldiers of the political elites' and connected to 'powerful politicians who are members of the gold cartels' (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024). These groups participate in both political intimidation and violent criminal acts such as robbery and murder, often with impunity due to their political ties (Moyo, 2020).

Mozambique's current landscape reveals the extremist group Ahlu Sunna Wa-Jamo (ASWJ) combining socio-economic grievances and state neglect with a radical Islamist ideology, creating a complex mix of political and criminal motives (Ewi et al., 2022; Macamo, 2016). RENAMO employed brutal tactics that blurred the lines between criminal and political violence (Sayed, 2022). In recent years, rapid urbanisation and high unemployment have driven the growth of urban youth gangs. While often motivated by socio-economic desperation, these groups exemplify a 'politicisation from below', as their emergence and control of urban spaces challenge the state's authority and highlight wider societal grievances against the post-liberation government (Greenspan, 2024).

### ***Persistence and new dynamics***

In post-1994 South Africa, gang violence persisted as former combatants, disillusioned by limited opportunities, turned to crime. The end of apartheid in South Africa, achieved through a negotiated process, left many of the country's coercive structures and deep-rooted economic inequalities in place. Former combatants were poorly reintegrated, and the new state's struggles with service delivery created a power vacuum that gangs were well positioned to exploit. South Africa's reintegration into the global arena led to an influx of international crime syndicates and a burgeoning drug trade. Persistent police ineffectiveness, corruption and community distrust allowed gangs to flourish. Prison gang culture significantly influenced street gangs, blurring the boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' dynamics (Petrus, 2015). Many

former gang members, encouraged to make the country 'ungovernable' and accustomed to violence, found it challenging to adapt to a political climate where their services were no longer required (Maringira & Masiya, 2018). In Zimbabwe, a significant development has been the adoption of violent tactics by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), whose 'Vanguard' youth paramilitary group has been involved in widespread intra-party violence (Moyo, 2020). This indicates a 'morphing into an intolerant, violent and democratically deficient polity, relatively analogous to ZANU-PF's narrative of violence' (Nyere, 2016).

### ***Motivations and nature of gangs in Southern Africa***

Complex socio-economic and political factors drive gangs in Southern Africa. In South Africa and Namibia, economic deprivation, poverty, unemployment and social exclusion are primary motivators (Vorvornator, 2024). South African youth join gangs like the Numbers Gang for survival, respect and a sense of belonging (Kelly & Ward, 2020). Apartheid did not just create poverty; it fragmented society. Therefore, the 'sense of belonging' provided by a gang like the Numbers Gang is a powerful act of rebuilding a social world, albeit a violent one. In post-apartheid South Africa, where the state systematically fragmented communities, the 'sense of belonging' offered by gangs is vital. For young people, groups like the Numbers Gang become a form of building, a violent community, filling the social void left by a legacy of division and providing a strong identity.

In Zimbabwe, gang membership is more intricate and politically motivated. While economic survival is a factor, political considerations exert considerable influence. The Green Bombers, aligned initially with ZANU-PF, have evolved into violent political militias involved in illicit activities and seeking to exert political control (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024). This fusion of criminality and political motives distinguishes Zimbabwe's gangs from those in South Africa, where gang culture primarily concerns survival and resistance to socio-economic oppression. In colonial Rhodesia, the creation of new urban centres erased traditional rules and identities, leaving youth without roots. The earliest gangs were not merely criminal but were 'competitive youth associations' trying to forge a new social order and identity amid uncertainty. This historical drive to create belonging from social upheaval connects to modern political gangs like the 'Green Bombers'. Although their methods and political ties have changed, they serve the same core purpose: providing a strong collective identity for marginalised youth in a society where traditional structures have been broken down. This enduring need remains a potent force. In Mozambique, gangs have emerged as informal power brokers, safeguarding areas plagued by insurgency and limited state control, particularly in Cabo Delgado (Bussotti & Coimbra, 2023). Gangs exploit weak government institutions beyond opportunism, filling social voids in resource-rich regions where the state is absent. For marginalised young men, gangs become key for identity, social cohesion, survival and status—a role the state fails to fulfil.

The nature of gangs varies regionally. South African gangs are highly organised and hierarchical, enabling large-scale crimes (Lindegaard & Gear, 2014). Rooted in prison culture, they expanded into cities, reflecting apartheid and governance failures in townships. In Zimbabwe, gangs like the Green Bombers are not only criminals but also political enforcers, using violence to suppress opposition (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024).

### ***Political dynamics and gang involvement***

The link between corruption, weak governance, political instability and the rise of state-sponsored gangs has fuelled gang violence and worsened instability in selected Southern African countries. [Table 4](#) summarises these findings.

### ***State incapacity***

State incapacity significantly fuels gang violence across Southern Africa, creating power vacuums that criminal groups exploit. In Mozambique, weak governance in rural areas allows gangs like the 'machete men' to operate with impunity through extortion, trafficking and violence (Ewi et al., 2022; Mlambo

**Table 4.** Showing summary of political dynamics and gang involvement.

Aspect	South Africa	Mozambique	Zimbabwe
Core issue	State incapacity enables urban gangs like '28s'.	State incapacity in rural areas empowers local gangs like the machete-wielding men, the Maputo gangs.	Political instability and incapacity have fostered the emergence of state-sponsored militias, such as the Green Bombers.
State complicity	Police corruption supports gangs; law enforcement is complicit in the drug trade.	Corruption at the local level allows gangs to control regions.	Institutional failure enables gangs to act as substitutes for state control.
Gang characteristics	Urban, hierarchical gangs (e.g. Numbers Gang, 28s) are involved in drug trafficking and extortion.	Rural-based gangs engage in extortion, trafficking and opportunistic political violence.	Politically motivated militias use violence to consolidate power.
Political influence	Gangs like '28s' intimidate voters and manipulate municipal elections	Maputo gangs extort political loyalty from communities, supporting the FRELIMO party	Gangs enforce ZANU-PF dominance through election rigging and voter intimidation.
State-sponsored gangs	There is no direct support, but gangs exploit political events to assert dominance.	Some gangs indirectly support FRELIMO, the ruling party, but are mainly opportunistic.	ZANU-PF directly supports Green Bombers for political manipulation.

Source: Authors' construction (2025).

& Masuku, 2022). Zimbabwe's political instability and economic decline lead to institutional breakdowns, exploited by militias like the Green Bombers, which replace government authority with organised violence (Garufu, 2025). ZANU-PF's ability to mobilise youth militias is not just about political power but is also deeply tied to exploiting economic desperation and, at times, ethnic loyalties (Shona vs. Ndebele). In South Africa, weak control in townships prevents addressing the underlying causes of gang violence, enabling gangs like '28s' to thrive in Cape Town and Johannesburg (Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021). Across these contexts, state incapacity allows gangs to destabilise communities.

### **State complicity**

State complicity, rooted in widespread corruption and institutional failure, drives and sustains gang violence across Southern Africa. Many state structures, often actively or passively, enable criminal enterprises. In South Africa, corruption within government agencies enables gangs to thrive in cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg (Loqani & Magadze, 2022; Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021). Police involvement in illegal activities like drug trafficking further compounds this failure, undermining trust and signalling that state mechanisms can be co-opted for mutual benefit. Similar dynamics occur in Mozambique, where local corruption facilitates the control of illicit economies by gangs with minimal interference (Machava, 2011). In Zimbabwe, instability and institutional failure allow gangs and militias such as the Green Bombers to act as substitutes for state control, often with political approval (Moyo, 2020).

### **State-sponsored gangs**

State-sponsored gangs show how state actors manipulate gangs for political power. In Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF uses militias like the Green Bombers to intimidate opponents, rig elections and maintain control (Moyo, 2020). These groups commit crimes and enforce party policies, especially during Zimbabwe's transition, which emerged from a protracted liberation war. The victorious ZANU-PF party did not dismantle the colonial state's 'governance by military operations' but instead adopted and refined it. Therefore, the Green Bombers have evolved not just as a gang but as a direct legacy of using youth militias as 'party foot-soldiers', a practice that transitioned seamlessly from the liberation struggle to post-independence political repression. In South Africa, gangs such as the '28s' influence elections by intimidating voters (Loqani & Magadze, 2022), but differ structurally. Zimbabwe's Green Bombers are well-organised, politically motivated militias with explicit government support (Mwonzora & Helliker, 2020). Their brutality is directly linked to ZANU-PF's control. South African gangs like the '28s' are primarily criminal, exploiting elections to assert power, with their violence blurring criminal and political

**Table 5.** Summary of economic drivers of gang violence in Southern Africa.

Aspect	South Africa	Mozambique	Zimbabwe
Illicit economies	Gangs control drug markets (methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana), aided by corruption.	Gangs dominate heroin trafficking along porous borders and weak governance.	Smaller-scale illicit activities, like extortion and illegal trade, fuel local gang crimes.
Resource scarcity	Clashes over informal sectors (e.g. vending, taxi industries) occur, often accompanied by widespread extortion.	Rural gangs exploit scarce resources, engaging in trafficking and extortion.	Gangs monopolise illegal gold mining, using violence to control resources.
Economic inequality	Unemployment and urban poverty drive youth to gangs in areas like Cape Flats.	Marginalised populations rely on gangs for survival, deepening poverty cycles.	Economic collapse pushes individuals to illegal mining, creating fertile ground for gangs.
Social consequences	Urban violence disrupts cohesion; youth seek gangs for financial gain and status.	Traditional social systems erode as gangs replace community structures.	Violence and resource monopolisation disrupt rural livelihoods and cause displacement.

Source: Authors' construction (2025).

boundaries (Dulley & Sampaio, 2020). Mozambique's gangs, tied to FRELIMO, have used electoral violence to disrupt opponents and manipulate local elections (Ewi et al., 2022; Machava, 2011). Unlike Zimbabwe's Green Bombers, Mozambique's gangs seem more opportunistic, using violence for political leverage.

### **Economic drivers of gang violence in Southern Africa**

Table 5 shows criminal gangs as a prime example of a socio-economic crisis, marked by uneven economic opportunities, social exclusion, discrimination, poverty and inequality. Economic forces fuel gang activities like illicit markets, territorial control and recruitment, creating a vicious cycle of violence and instability in Southern Africa.

#### **Illicit economics**

In Southern Africa, illicit economies, especially the illegal drug trade, significantly fuel gang violence. Mozambique and South Africa show this trend, with gangs controlling key drug markets. In Mozambique, gangs like Sabotage and Jovens dominate heroin routes, exploiting weak governance and porous coastlines (Ewi et al., 2022; Garcia & Ribeiro, 2023). South African gangs such as the 28s, 26s and Hard Livings control methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana markets, using violence to maintain dominance (van der Linde, 2022). Corruption exacerbates gang activity, as officials facilitate trafficking and undermine law enforcement (Machethe & Mofokeng, 2022; Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021). The drug trade also has social impacts, as impoverished communities join gangs for economic survival and social status, especially in South Africa's Cape Flats, creating a cycle of poverty and crime.

#### **Economic inequality and resource competition**

Economic inequality is a significant driver of gang violence in Southern Africa (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024; Marawako, 2022). Gangs exploit the desperation of impoverished communities. In South Africa, gangs such as Wemmer Pan and Vlaktefontein control informal economies, extorting vendors and small business owners (Shaw & Haysom, 2016). The Cape Flats is a hotspot for gang violence, as rivals clash over control of vending stalls and taxi routes (Machethe & Mofokeng, 2022). This extortion exacerbates economic inequalities. In Zimbabwe, economic inequality fuels gangs like the 'Mashurugwi', who control illegal gold mining (Mkodzongi, 2020). They terrorise miners and control access to gold reserves. With Zimbabwe's formal economy struggling, many rely on illegal mining, creating a fertile ground for gang activity (Marawako, 2022). The 'Mashurugwi' operate in mining regions such as Kwekwe and Kadoma, engaging in violent clashes over territorial control. Gangs in both countries exploit economic inequalities. Zimbabwe's economic instability and hyperinflation push people into informal sectors, such as illegal

**Table 6.** Summary of the impact of criminal gangs on society.

Dimension	South Africa	Zimbabwe	Mozambique	Broader impact
Social stability	Gangs like Numbers Gangs and Hard Livings create fear, undermine trust and disrupt community cohesion.	Green Bombers use violence during elections, creating fear and breaking social trust.	Pervasive fear and mistrust dismantle community cohesion. State failure to provide security results in violent community self-policing, or 'linchamento' (lynching).	Communities face insecurity, mistrust and long-term social instability.
Economic impact	The extortion of businesses and control of informal sectors hinder investment and exacerbate poverty.	Gangs dominate artisanal mining, extorting resources and discouraging legal activities.	Violent groups fund their activities by controlling transnational illicit economies, including trafficking in heroin, timber and gemstones.	Economic instability and poverty cycles worsen across communities.
Mental health	Constant violence causes psychological distress and toxic community environments.	Fear and violence lead to widespread mental health challenges.	Violence is used as a deliberate psychological tool to control the population. Exposure to atrocities and the loss of family members leaves deep, lasting trauma.	Violence-induced trauma undermines societal well-being.
Political consequences	Weak law enforcement allows gangs to control territories and reduce state authority.	Political militias weaken democratic processes through voter suppression.	Violence is a long-standing and accepted tool within Mozambique's political culture, used by both state and non-state actors, resulting in a loss of faith.	Governance and civic trust deteriorate, reducing the rule of law.

Source: Authors' construction (2025).

mining, which is a hotspot for gang violence. Similarly, the informal economy in South Africa is vital for gangs, particularly in urban centres such as Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg, where extortion is common (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024).

### **Impact of criminal gangs on society in Southern Africa**

The presence and activities of crime syndicates have had a devastating impact on communities in Southern Africa. As a result, gangs integrate into local communities and exert significant control over the area's social, economic and political structures. Their operations frequently lead to societal instability, harsh and violent experiences for individuals and families, and substantial economic losses. These sub-themes are described in Table 6.

#### **Social stability and community impact**

Gang violence in the chosen countries significantly affects social stability and how safe people feel in townships. Gangs (see Table 6), such as the Numbers Gangs and Hard Livings, thrive by spreading fear and taking control of areas, as seen in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha in South Africa. These gangs use violence to keep their hold on territory, which hampers effective law enforcement and spreads fear among communities. (Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023; Ragolane & Khoza, 2024). This fear damages community cohesion by isolating individuals and stopping collective efforts against violence. The ongoing insecurity weakens social trust and causes chaos, allowing informal networks to take over safety responsibilities. Youth gangs such as Green Bombers and political militias disrupt Zimbabwe's social order, especially during elections, which are often exploited by political parties to silence opposition and intimidate voters, creating terror in communities. (Moyo, 2020; Ngwenya, 2017). Gang-related violence worsens societal divisions and damages the trust needed for democratic processes and active civic participation (Mwonzora & Helliker, 2020). The mental scars caused by these acts harm communities and lead to long-term societal breakdown (Mwonzora & Helliker, 2020). In both cases, gang violence causes a collapse of social stability, with fear and insecurity replacing trust and cooperation. In

Mozambique, violent groups, from criminal gangs to insurgents like ASWJ, significantly weaken social stability by spreading widespread fear and mistrust, disrupting community cohesion (Machava, 2011).

This insecurity results in the displacement of hundreds of thousands, creating humanitarian crises. Without state security, communities turn to violent vigilante justice, such as 'linchamento', showing a breakdown of the rule of law and embedding violence further into society (Sampaio, 2024). This cycle of 'violence against violence' highlights a desperate search for order where the state has failed. Beyond these negative impacts, gangs often offer a form of 'social control, protection and even economic redistribution in areas where the state is absent or predatory' (Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023; Ragolane & Khoza, 2024). They may resolve disputes, provide loans or shield residents from external threats, making them an integrated, albeit violent, part of the community life.

### **Economic impacts of gangs in Southern Africa**

Gang violence significantly contributes to economic instability by impeding business activity, discouraging investment and perpetuating cycles of poverty. In South Africa, criminal networks such as the Numbers Gangs exert substantial control over businesses in areas like Manenberg and Gugulethu, demanding 'protection fees' and extorting small business owners. (Machethe & Mofokeng, 2022). The threat of violence, including property damage and personal harm, deters investors and stifles economic growth. Jeke et al. (2021) and Madibana, Fouché & Mnisi, (2020) note that these criminal enterprises divert resources from productive activities, thereby undermining the financial well-being of local communities. In Zimbabwe's artisanal mining sector, gangs like Makorokoza dominate and extort miners, hindering legitimate activities (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024; Mkodzongi, 2020). Tofa (2020) notes that extortions cripple businesses, restrict resources and force miners and entrepreneurs to pay fees amid fear and instability. This limits access and pushes people toward illegal, violent activities, worsening poverty. In Mozambique, violent groups like ASWJ cause significant economic harm, disrupting legitimate activities such as the multi-billion-dollar TotalEnergies LNG project (Machava, 2011). They exploit and control illegal economies, including trafficking in heroin and gemstones, to fund their operations (Ewi et al., 2022). This violence worsens poverty and inequality, destroying livelihoods and displacing communities. For many youths, a lack of economic opportunities and marginalisation push them to join these groups, creating a vicious cycle where economic grievances drive the very violence that harms the economy (Sampaio, 2024).

### **Sociocultural factors and criminal gangs**

Cultural and social factors play a vital role in shaping the dynamics of criminal gangs in Southern Africa. In this context, gangs are frequently formed in response to historical and contemporary societal pressures, where cultural norms, social structures and group dynamics influence their behaviours and identities. The following sub-themes (see Table 7) examine the interaction between identity, youth

**Table 7.** Showing a summary of cultural and social factors in criminal gangs in Southern Africa.

Aspect	South Africa	Mozambique	Zimbabwe
Identity and social fabric	Gangs like the 28s use ethnic identities (Xhosa, Coloured) for solidarity, born out of apartheid and exclusion.	Gangs like Shiboka form in informal urban areas due to inequality and urbanisation, with less ethnic or political motive.	Gangs often emerge from ethnic and political tensions (e.g. Shona vs. Ndebele) and are frequently utilised as political tools during periods of hardship.
Youth culture and gang appeal	Gangs offer autonomy, power and financial opportunities in poor townships, attracting youth for status and illicit wealth.	Youth join gangs for protection and social status in environments lacking opportunities.	Youth join for survival, economic gain and political manipulation, driven by high unemployment and instability.
Recruitment process	Recruitment occurs through social connections, often with promises of financial gain, protection and social status.	A lack of education and economic opportunities drives recruitment in informal settings.	Recruitment is politically influenced, with youth joining for economic survival and political violence.
Cultural influence on gang formation	Influenced by apartheid, gang culture is rooted in ethnic and racial identities.	Gangs form in response to urbanisation and social inequality, offering a sense of belonging.	Gangs are shaped by political and ethnic divisions and used as instruments for political control and violence.

Source: Authors' construction (2025).

culture and the role of traditional leaders in gang violence, illustrated with examples from Southern African countries.

### ***Identity and social fabric of gang members***

In South Africa and Zimbabwe, gang membership is intertwined with ethnic, racial and political identities. In South Africa, gangs like the 28s are prominent among Xhosa and Coloured communities, using shared ethnic identity for solidarity and resistance against systemic exclusion (van der Linde, 2022). These gangs are fuelled by socio-economic marginalisation, including joblessness, systemic racism and mass incarceration (Dziewanski & Henry, 2023), representing a response to historical injustice where marginalised communities rely on gangs for protection and status.

Zimbabwean gangs are also politically charged. Political gangs often emerge from economically marginalised regions, with ethnic rivalries, particularly between Shona and Ndebele communities, manipulated to fuel political violence (Helliker et al., 2022; Matanzima et al., 2024). This political dimension transforms gangs into tools of political warfare, unlike the community-based resistance in South Africa. Gang identity in Zimbabwe is thus influenced by socio-economic deprivation, ethnic divisions and political agendas (Gusha, 2018). In Mozambique, gang formation is driven by socio-economic disparities and urbanisation rather than being directly linked to ethnic or political identity (Sampaio, 2024). Mozambican gangs, like the Shiboka, emerge in informal areas with limited access to education and employment, offering disenfranchised youth belonging and safety (Ras, 2023).

### ***Youths and the attraction to gangs***

Youth culture has a significant influence on gang affiliation in Southern Africa (Table 7), although the specific motivations differ. Across the region, profound economic deprivation and youth unemployment serve as the primary recruitment engine for gangs. For instance, in South Africa's townships, gangs offer an alternative to systemic poverty (Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021; Vuninga, 2020). In townships such as Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, gangs offer young people a sense of authority and autonomy, as well as financial opportunities through illicit activities (Gibson & Maringira, 2020). In Zimbabwe, the collapse of the formal economy has made illegal mining a gang-controlled survival strategy. Dodo et al. (2019) argue that the combination of economic instability drives youths towards gangs for both economic survival and political exploitation. Unlike in South Africa, where material wealth is a primary motivator, Zimbabwean gangs also function as political tools. These dual roles shape youths' motivations, leading to the development of militia-style groups involved in violence, intimidation and extortion (Raleigh, 2016). In Mozambique, urban marginalisation drives youth to seek protection and status within gang structures such as the Shiboka. Despite facing unemployment and economic instability, this gang culture is less politically motivated, emerging from a weak environment with fragile family and community structures (Misago, 2019; Ras, 2023). Thus, while economic drivers are present across all three nations, the level of political influence and the emphasis on social status differ, shaping the specific character of youth gang involvement in each context.

### ***Gender, masculinity and the role of women in gangs***

The motivations, structures and impacts of gang violence are deeply influenced by prevailing gender norms, especially the concepts of masculinity that motivate male involvement, as well as the specific vulnerabilities and roles of women and girls. (Vuninga, 2020). While the literature review often presents a male-centric perspective, examining the findings through a gendered lens uncovers vital insights into how these violent groups are maintained. In South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, many young men are drawn to gangs as a way to perform hyper-masculinity in contexts where traditional routes to social status have been cut off. (Gusha, 2018; Ras, 2023). In communities facing high levels of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, the ability to act as a provider, a conventional mark of masculinity, is minimal (Jantjies & Popovac, 2011). For many young people in these contexts, gang membership is a

response to an intersectional crisis of identity, where economic marginalisation directly challenges traditional notions of masculinity, making the power and respect offered by gangs a compelling alternative.

Significantly, the specific roles of women and girls within these gang structures highlight a notable gap in the reviewed literature. The focus on male members and their motivations obscures the complex ways in which women participate and are affected. Without this perspective, the organisational resilience of gangs remains poorly understood, as women often hold essential, yet frequently coerced or subordinate, roles ranging from intelligence gathering and smuggling to providing alibis or managing safe-houses, all of which are vital for the group's survival. The absence of this data in the reviewed articles emphasises a critical area for future research.

### **Responses to gang violence in Southern Africa**

Various Southern African governments have adopted different approaches to addressing the perennial problem of gang violence. [Table 8](#) buttresses these approaches in the respective countries. These strategies, which include law enforcement, rehabilitation programs and political interventions, have all had some effect. However, the process has remained challenging due to corruption and resource constraints resulting from the socio-political context.

#### **Law enforcement and militarisation of police forces**

South Africa's approach to gang violence, particularly in significant townships (see [Table 8](#)), relies on a militarised law enforcement structure (Annah, 2022). Specialised units target organised crime using aggressive tactics, financial investigations and asset forfeiture (Ragolane & Khoza, 2024). However, corruption and limited resources hinder effectiveness. These harsh tactics may disrupt gang activity but fail to address root causes such as poverty and unemployment, potentially exacerbating the problem (Ragolane & Khoza, 2024). Mozambique exhibits a similar trend of militarisation in urban centres like Maputo, where police confrontations with gangs often escalate into prolonged violence (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020). While intended to quell gang activity, the use of force often fuels further violence. The underlying socio-economic drivers, including economic hardship, unemployment and poverty, remain unaddressed, perpetuating gang recruitment. Much like South Africa, Mozambique's heavy-handed strategies are reactive rather than preventative, failing to mitigate the structural issues that create gangs.

Zimbabwe, while not explicitly militarised, also relies on a robust state apparatus to tackle gang violence (Marawako, 2022). The emergence of politically motivated youth militias, often recruited by political parties, presents a distinct yet related challenge (Raleigh, 2016). These militias, engaged in politically

**Table 8.** Showing a summary of government responses to gang violence in Southern Africa.

Aspect	South Africa	Mozambique	Zimbabwe
Law enforcement and militarisation	Militarised police forces, such as the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigations, are hindered by corruption and resource limitations.	The militarised approach in urban areas like Maputo escalates violence and ignores root causes.	Strong state apparatus using youth militias for political violence, mirroring coercive methods elsewhere.
Alternative approaches	Community-based policing, like Chrysalis Academy, focuses on vocational training and mentorship for at-risk youth.	Limited emphasis is placed on community-based policing; however, community engagement has potential if adequately implemented.	Limited integration of alternatives; community efforts focus on politically motivated youth violence.
Effectiveness	Community-based approaches show potential but face socio-economic challenges, limiting effectiveness.	Militarised strategies fail to address underlying structural socio-economic issues.	Politically motivated youth militia groups complicate state efforts to mitigate gang violence.
Restorative justice	Promotes long-term solutions focusing on rehabilitation and reconciliation.	Traditional justice systems emphasise reconciliation, reparation and community involvement.	Restorative justice is not yet prominent, but it has the potential to reduce politically motivated violence.

Source: Authors' construction (2025).

charged violence, can be regarded as an extension of the law enforcement issue. While not a fully militarised police force, Zimbabwe's dependence on these groups underscores the state's use of coercive measures to manage violence, akin to the militarised approaches in South Africa and Mozambique. All three countries exhibit a reliance on force, often neglecting to address the underlying socio-economic and political factors that drive gang activity.

### ***Alternative approaches to addressing gang violence***

In contrast to militarised responses, alternative approaches, particularly community-based policing, have gained traction in Southern Africa as potential solutions to gang violence. South African projects, such as the Chrysalis Academy, demonstrate the effectiveness of community participation in addressing the socio-economic factors that contribute to gang membership (Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023). The Academy offers at-risk children vocational training, mentoring and life skills, aiming to provide alternatives to gang life. Dlamini and Mbambo (2019) argue that community-based policing, which fosters collaboration between neighbourhoods and law enforcement, can help minimise gang recruitment by building trust and creating safer environments. This shift from a reactive, militarised approach to a more preventative, community-driven strategy holds significant promise.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of community-based solutions remains a matter of controversy despite these efforts. Blair et al. (2021) found that community participation did not result in a significant reduction in gang violence in South Africa, suggesting that community engagement alone is insufficient without addressing the broader socio-economic context. Restorative justice is another promising strategy to break the cycle of punishment and vengeance. Murhula and Tolla (2021) and Murambadoro et al. (2020) advocate for restorative justice as a means to encourage reconciliation. This approach seeks to bring together victims, offenders and the community to address the issues that promote violence. Restorative justice, which focuses on rehabilitation rather than punishment, allows offenders to reintegrate into society, which is critical for long-term reduction in gang violence.

### **Discussion of findings**

The comparative review established a crucial insight that studies focusing on a single country may overlook, while socio-economic marginalisation remains a common recurrence. However, the modus operandi of gangs varies significantly across the region. They operate as entrenched criminal enterprises in South Africa, as direct instruments of political repression in Zimbabwe and as key actors in illicit resource economies in Mozambique. This typology is a key contribution of this study, challenging a monolithic understanding of 'gangs' in the region. A central theme across the studies highlights a consistent interplay of historical, political, economic and cultural factors in shaping gang activities in the region.

The colonial legacy in Southern Africa, characterised by racial segregation, land dispossession and forced labour, has had a lasting impact on social structures and governance, contributing to the rise of criminal gangs in the region. In South Africa, apartheid policies created impoverished, isolated townships where gangs such as the Tsotsi and Numbers Gangs emerged as responses to systemic exclusion (Kelly & Ward, 2020). While South Africa's post-apartheid government struggled with governance and service delivery, which exacerbated gang influence, Zimbabwe and Mozambique faced gang proliferation due to weak state institutions and political instability. In Zimbabwe's post-colonial context, particularly involving political actors like the Green Bombers, gangs assumed significant political roles, further destabilising the region (Samudzi, 2021). Conversely, although similarly rooted in social and economic hardship in Mozambique, gang activity was more closely tied to economic challenges as gangs filled the void left by the state's inability to provide essential services (Mkodzongi, 2020). Thus, while all these countries share a colonial and post-colonial legacy that facilitated gang culture, the role of gangs in each case varies in the political and economic spheres, reflecting how weak governance and the failure to address historical inequalities contribute to their proliferation.

While these nations grapple with a colonial legacy, their post-colonial transitions shaped the specific nature of gang politicisation. In South Africa, the incomplete dismantling of apartheid structures allowed pre-existing criminal networks to thrive and engage opportunistically with the new democratic

politics. Conversely, in Zimbabwe, the transition institutionalised the ruling party's use of militias as a tool of statecraft, establishing a direct and lasting link between the state and political gangs. The intersection of gangs and politics in Southern Africa can be analysed through social disorganisation and strain theories. These theories illuminate how gang violence proliferates in environments characterised by weak governance, economic inequality and social instability. Social disorganisation theory posits that crime and gang activity flourish where formal institutions such as law enforcement, education and families are lacking. This is particularly evident in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, where corruption, poor governance and political instability have facilitated the proliferation of gangs (Dziewanski, 2021). These weakened state structures enable gangs to establish parallel power systems, filling a void left by ineffective governance. For instance, in South Africa, corruption within various levels of government undermines law enforcement, allowing gang networks to function unchecked (Mmakwena et al., 2023; van der Linde, 2022). Similarly, in Mozambique, fragile rural governance presents an opportunity for gangs to dominate illicit markets, such as drug trafficking, with minimal state interference (Ewi et al., 2022).

The strain theory offers further insight into the political involvement of gangs, emphasising the frustration and strain experienced by marginalised groups due to economic and social disparities. In Namibia and Zimbabwe, political instability and economic collapse have exacerbated this frustration, contributing to the rise of state-affiliated gangs such as the Green Bombers. These gangs blur the boundaries between crime and politics, serving as instruments of state power to suppress opposition and influence elections (Garufu, 2025). From the perspective of strain theory, individuals who are denied legitimate avenues for advancement may resort to crime and gang membership as alternative routes to status and financial security. Zimbabwe's ruling party exploits this situation, utilising gangs to maintain political control while concurrently offering gang members economic incentives and a sense of purpose. This pattern reflects a broader trend in Southern Africa, where gangs are not merely criminal organisations but also instruments of political manipulation.

The review demonstrates how social contacts influence criminal behaviour, particularly in explaining why gang involvement persists across generations. People tend to learn criminal behaviours from peers and influential figures who support deviance. For instance, on the Cape Flats in South Africa, young people witness gang violence, extortion and drug trafficking as survival strategies (Shaw & Haysom, 2016). The Numbers Gangs, which are dominant in townships such as Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, are closed networks with strict hierarchies where criminal values are passed down (Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023; Ragolane & Khoza, 2024). This intergenerational transfer makes it hard to dismantle gangs, as membership becomes vital for social identity and survival in these communities.

Economic factors significantly influence gang activity. Social disorganisation theory links economic deprivation and weak social controls to increased crime. In Southern Africa, historical inequalities and ongoing socio-political issues worsen economic disparities, fuelling gang violence. Gangs thrive in urban slums and rural mining areas, where poverty and unemployment drive involvement in illicit economies. In Mozambique and South Africa, the illegal drug trade provides gangs with income, helping them gain power and intimidate rivals and authorities (Garcia & Ribeiro, 2023; van der Linde, 2022). Competition over drug routes, extortion and informal economies deepens gang presence.

In South Africa's urban areas like Cape Town, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth, gang violence worsens due to economic inequality, especially in informal sectors such as street vending and taxis (Shaw & Haysom, 2016). In Zimbabwe, economic collapse has allowed gangs like Mashurugwi to dominate illegal gold mining through violence (Mkodzongi, 2020). The activity of these gangs highlights how economic hardship pushes individuals toward crime for survival, fuelling violence and lawlessness. Strain theory posits that when legal means of achieving financial stability are blocked, individuals experience strain and may turn to crime as an alternative means of attaining financial stability.

Sociocultural influences on gang dynamics in Southern Africa align with social disorganisation theory. Social instability, economic decline and political manipulation create conditions in which gangs can control communities through fear and violence. In South Africa, particularly in townships such as Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, gangs undermine social trust by exercising territorial control and coercion (Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023; Ragolane & Khoza, 2024). Social disorganisation theory posits that crime becomes more prevalent when communities lack robust social networks and institutions to regulate

behaviour. Similar patterns emerge in Zimbabwe, where groups like the Green Bombers and other political militias exploit social divisions to manipulate elections and suppress dissent (Moyo, 2020; Ngwenya, 2017).

In communities where gang culture is prevalent, young individuals are more likely to adopt criminal behaviours through their interactions with peers engaged in gang activity. This is particularly apparent in Zimbabwe's artisanal mining sector, where the Mashurugwi recruit young men from underprivileged backgrounds, exposing them to violent and exploitative conditions (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024; Mkodzongi, 2020). The normalisation of gang-related violence in these communities fosters a culture where criminality is perceived as a viable means of economic survival. Mozambique's gang networks also exhibit similar patterns, where young individuals, often from marginalised urban areas, become involved in illicit activities due to peer influence and a lack of alternative opportunities (Ras, 2023).

Economically, gangs destabilise local economies by siphoning wealth from productive sectors and reinforcing cycles of poverty. Social disorganisation theory helps elucidate why economic stagnation, weak state institutions and a lack of community cohesion enable gangs to flourish. In South Africa, gangs extort small business owners through 'protection fees' and engage in illicit trade, hindering economic growth (Machethe & Mofokeng, 2022). In Zimbabwe, the emergence of gangs in artisanal mining not only disrupts local economies but also deters legitimate investment, exacerbating economic instability (Katz-Lavigne et al., 2024; Mkodzongi, 2020). Meanwhile, in Mozambique, gang influence is more localised, with illicit economies thriving due to urban poverty and a lack of formal employment opportunities. Although all three countries suffer economic harm from gang activities, the extent and nature of this harm vary according to the structural weaknesses of their economies.

In addition to their local operations, gangs in Southern Africa have regional and international networks that enhance their influence. These transnational connections allow gangs to expand their criminal enterprises beyond national borders, facilitating drug trafficking, human smuggling and arms trading. Gang members form alliances and adopt criminal techniques through interactions with international crime syndicates. In Mozambique, for instance, drug trafficking routes are linked to global networks that supply illicit substances to Europe and Asia (Ewi et al., 2022). South African gangs also maintain connections with international drug cartels, enabling them to exercise control over extensive drug distribution networks (Garcia & Ribeiro, 2023). The strain theory perspective suggests that transnational gang activities offer an alternative way for individuals to achieve economic progress when opportunities are scarce in their home countries. The allure of profitable criminal ventures often surpasses the dangers, especially in areas where poverty and unemployment are widespread. This explains why many young people are attracted to organised crime, as these networks provide financial rewards and a sense of belonging that are often missing in their social settings.

The nature of these political-gang entanglements has not been static over the 2010–2024 period. For example, in Zimbabwe, the role of militias like the Green Bombers intensified around election periods, demonstrating a cyclical politicisation. In South Africa, the period saw an increasing brazenness in gangs' attempts to influence municipal politics beyond simple territorial control. Meanwhile, in Mozambique, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado post-2017 dramatically shifted gang dynamics from urban criminality towards quasi-insurgent activity in the north.

Government responses to gang violence in Southern Africa vary. South Africa's predominantly militarised approach, involving law enforcement units such as the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigations, targets gangs with aggressive tactics (Annah, 2022). While briefly effective, it often overlooks root causes, such as poverty and unemployment, that sustain gang cycles (Ragolane & Khoza, 2024). Mozambique also uses force, leading to deadly clashes, but fails to address socio-economic problems (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020). Zimbabwe's less militarised strategy includes youth militias used for political gain, worsening violence by blurring law enforcement and political motives (Raleigh, 2016). South Africa has also attempted community policing and programmes like the Chrysalis Academy to address socio-economic factors, but critics argue that these initiatives lack sufficient resources and fail to tackle systemic issues effectively (Blair et al., 2021; Dlamini & Mbambo, 2019).

Before colonisation, many Southern African societies thrived on complex kinship networks that provided social control, economic stability and identity. Colonialism dismantled these systems by drawing artificial borders, establishing wage economies that separated families and replacing traditional authority.

This, coupled with cultural imperialism, created a post-colonial 'void' marked by normlessness, alienation and a masculinity crisis among youth cut off from tradition.

Gangs emerge as an alternative, offering a new 'kinship' with loyalty and strict order in a chaotic, unjust world. They help marginalised young men regain power, respect and agency, serving as responses to colonial trauma and their ongoing search for meaning. However, gang activity cannot be understood as something 'outside' the system. It is a core element of the political and economic structure of these post-colonial states. Political patronage is not the only reason these gangs thrive. Instead, political actors succeed when they leverage the existing social power and legitimacy that these gangs already possess within their communities. The gangs' role as social order is their primary function; their political usefulness is secondary. The persistent and widespread nature of these gangs' socio-political environment in these countries shows that the move towards a modern state remains unfinished. The gang's value system (loyalty, respect through violence, strict hierarchy) directly clashes with the principles of the modern state (impartial rule of law, individual rights). However, it provides a more immediate and tangible form of justice and order for its members. Intergenerational transfer of leadership is not merely a succession plan for a criminal enterprise, but a way for a complete subculture, a resilient way of life, to be passed down. It ensures the gang's values and identity endure, making it a stable institution in an otherwise unstable world. They represent a continuing 'hangover of the destruction of their traditional ways of life', and without addressing the fundamental needs for identity, belonging and a functional value system, superficial policy solutions are unlikely to succeed.

### ***Conclusion and recommendations***

This review synthesises findings from 60 research papers, highlighting the interconnected historical, political, economic and cultural factors that drive gang violence in Southern Africa. The legacies of colonialism and apartheid have created entrenched social and economic inequalities, while governance failures post-independence, characterised by corruption, weak institutions and instability, have exacerbated the problem and fostered conditions conducive to gang formation.

Economic drivers such as poverty, unemployment and competition for resources have rendered marginalised populations, particularly youth, vulnerable to gangs, which provide alternative means of survival. Illicit economies like drug trafficking and illegal mining further exacerbate territorial conflicts and cycles of violence. Gangs are also politically exploited for voter intimidation, electoral fraud and suppression of opposition, thereby undermining governance and eroding trust in democratic institutions. The societal impact is profound: Gang violence dismantles community cohesion, spreads fear and isolates individuals while crippling local economies by discouraging investment and stifling businesses. A key finding is that gangs in post-colonial Southern Africa provide social identity where traditional structures have eroded, making them a fundamental, not external, part of the post-colonial social fabric. Despite governmental efforts such as policing and militarised responses, these approaches frequently falter due to corruption and mistrust between law enforcement and communities.

This review concludes that effective policies to combat gang violence must be tailored to the specific functions and nature of gangs in each country, as a one-size-fits-all approach will not succeed. In South Africa, where gangs are deeply embedded in the social, economic and community fabric of townships, the emphasis should be on community-driven solutions such as social reintegration and restorative justice, rather than solely relying on militarised force. In Zimbabwe, where gangs often serve as political enforcers for the state, interventions need to go beyond community policing and encompass high-level anti-corruption initiatives and democratic reforms aimed at dismantling the patronage networks linking elites to these violent groups. Finally, in Mozambique, where gangs are heavily involved in transnational crime and resource extraction, the most effective approach must combine regional security efforts with local economic development to disrupt illicit economies and offer young people genuine alternatives.

### ***Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research***

This review provides valuable insights into gang violence in Southern Africa; however, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, the study relies heavily on existing research, which may not fully

capture the lived experiences of individuals directly affected by gang violence. Conducting interviews with community members, former gang members and policymakers would yield a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the situation. While the study examines regional patterns, it is important to remember that each country faces unique challenges. Future research could benefit from more in-depth case studies investigating how these distinct factors shape gang activity in each country. The study also highlights the role of economic factors; however, it does not examine the impact of global factors, such as international drug trafficking networks, on gang activities in the region. Further research could investigate how these global forces impact local gang economies and recruitment strategies. A critical gap in this review is gendered dynamics; understanding the roles of women in gang structures points to a critical area for future research.

Future research should assess the long-term outcomes of community-based policing, vocational training and restorative justice programmes to determine what works best and how these programmes can be scaled up effectively. Furthermore, as a meta-synthesis of existing research, the study is constrained by the data available within the selected articles. This limitation made it unfeasible to construct a granular historical timeline of gang politicisation, as the source literature often focuses on thematic issues rather than providing consistent longitudinal data. Therefore, we recommend that future research undertake dedicated historical case studies to map the evolution of these gang-political networks over time. Addressing these limitations and exploring these areas for future research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of gang violence in Southern Africa, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable solutions tailored to the specific needs of each community.

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### Author contributions

CRediT: **Mary S. Mangai**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Austin A. Ayodele**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration statement

The paper presents an original review on ‘Politicising Violent Gangs in Selected Southern African Countries: A Comparative Review of Violent Crime’. The report remains unpublished and is not available for consideration by other publishing journals.

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## Data availability statement

The manuscript includes all the data that underpins the study's conclusions. Data sharing does not apply to this article as no data were created or analysed in this study.

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## Appendices

Appendix A. Database and number of articles initially searched.

S/N	Database	Number of articles (n)
1	Science Direct	855
2	SAGE Journals	804
3	Google Scholar	734
4	Scopus	665
5	AJOL/Grey literature	413
6	EBSCOhost	583
7	Taylor and Francis	478
	Online	
	Total	n = 4532

Source: Authors' construction (2025).

## Appendix B. Characteristics of the studies.

S/N	First author and year	Primary objective	Study location	Type of gang violence	Socio-economic factor/aspect explored	Study population	Method
1.	Annah (2022)	Examining government measures to combat organised crime.	South Africa	Organised crime, gang-related violence	Government responses, law enforcement	Policymakers, law enforcement officials	Literature review, policy analysis
2.	Alexander and McGregor (2013)	Explore the politics of patronage and violence in Zimbabwe, highlighting how ZANU-PF has maintained power through these means.	Zimbabwe	State-sponsored political violence, militia violence, election-related intimidation	Political patronage, state-building, authoritarianism, coercive power	ZANU-PF, state institutions, Zimbabwean citizens	Literature review
3.	Blair et al. (2021)	Investigating the impact of community policing on crime and trust.	Global South (incl. South Africa)	Community policing, gang violence and crime	Trust in police and the effectiveness of community policing	Global population, South African communities	Experimental research, survey analysis
4.	Bukarti and Munasinghe (2020)	Analysing the Mozambique conflict and its effect on security.	Mozambique	Criminal gangs and armed groups	Socio-economic instability, unemployment	Residents, political actors	Qualitative research, report analysis
5.	Bussotti and Coimbra (2023)	To evaluate SADC interventions against insurgencies and their role in controlling gang violence.	Mozambique	Territorial control, insurgent-linked violence	Weak governance, insurgency	Community members affected by insurgency	Political science and field research
6.	Chiwara (2024)	To examine how structural inequalities in Namibia and South Africa perpetuate social dislocation and gang activity.	South Africa	Urban violence, extortion and petty crime	Structural inequalities, racial segregation	Marginalised urban communities	Critical social work analysis
7.	Dlamini and Mbambo (2019)	Understanding policing in cybercrime in South Africa.	South Africa	Cybercrime and its connection to gangs	Technology and law enforcement challenges	Law enforcement personnel, experts	Case study, qualitative research
8.	Dodo et al. (2019)	Examine youth violence and weapon usage in Zimbabwe's districts	Zimbabwe	Youth gang violence	Youth violence, weapon use and gang involvement	Youth in selected Zimbabwean districts	Survey-based research
9.	Dziewanski (2021)	To explore the dynamics of African gangs, focusing on their entry and exit.	Cape Town, South Africa	Organised gang violence	Urban poverty, unemployment and social exclusion	Gang members, former gang members	Qualitative interviews, ethnographic study
10.	Dziewanski and Henry (2023)	Compare the cultural dynamics of coloured gangs in Cape Town and Indigenous gangs in Canada.	South Africa, Canada	Ethnic-based gang violence	Ethnicity, race and socio-economic marginalisation	Cape Town and Canadian gang members	Comparative analysis
11.	Ewi et al. (2022).	Investigate links between violent extremism and organised crime	Mozambique	Violent extremism and organised crime	Role of weak governance and links to transnational crime	Local communities in Mozambique	Qualitative and policy analysis
12.	Forde (2022)	To explore the relationship between spatial inequalities and violence in divided communities.	South Africa	Community violence, spatially driven conflicts	Urban inequality, racial division	Residents in spatially divided areas	Political geography analysis
13.	Garcia and Ribeiro (2023)	To examine Mozambique's blue economy and maritime security in its geopolitical context.	Mozambique	Maritime-based gang activities (e.g. heroin trafficking).	Weak governance and exploitation of natural resources	Coastal regions and maritime industries	Qualitative analysis of geopolitics
14.	Garufu (2025)	Examine political will in addressing corruption.	Zimbabwe	Politically sponsored gang violence	Impact of corruption and institutional failure on political violence	Zimbabwean political institutions	Thematic analysis
15.	Geldenhuys (2016)	To identify common crimes committed by organised criminal groups in South Africa.	South Africa	Organised crime, extortion and drug trafficking	Economic opportunities and informal markets	Organised criminal groups	Descriptive case study
16.	Gibson and Maringira (2020)	Explore gang relationships and their dynamics in a black township in South Africa.	South Africa	Gang-related violence	Gang relationships, youth and social cohesion	South African township youth	Qualitative study

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## Appendix B. Continued

S/N	First author and year	Primary objective	Study location	Type of gang violence	Socio-economic factor/aspect explored	Study population	Method
17.	Greenspan (2024)	To understand the systemic culture of violence and crime during and after apartheid.	South Africa	Political violence, state-sponsored violence	state complexity in violence, legacies of racial segregation	Apartheid state actors, liberation movements, criminal gangs	Historical and political analysis
18.	Gusha (2018)	Explore ethnic cohesion between the Ndebele and Shona communities through Paul's ethics of reconciliation.	Zimbabwe	Political and ethnic violence	Ethnic tensions, reconciliation and political violence	Ndebele and Shona communities	Theoretical analysis
19.	Helliker et al. (2022)	Theorise and historicise the livelihoods of ethnic minorities in Zimbabwe.	Zimbabwe	Ethnic-based gang violence	Ethnic identity, socio-political tensions, livelihoods	Ethnic minorities in Zimbabwe	Theoretical analysis
20.	Huigen (2022)	To explore exchange relations in a South African gang since apartheid, focusing on smartphones for the drug trade.	South Africa	Drug trade and socio-economic exchanges	Poverty, inequality and access to technology	Urban gangs in post-apartheid South Africa	Ethnographic and cultural analysis
21.	Jacobs and Schuetze (2011)	Explore how communities in post-war Mozambique seek security and justice in a context of state failure and widespread crime.	Mozambique	vigilantism against suspected criminals	State failure, lack of security and justice	Local communities, suspected criminals	Ethnographic research, case studies
22.	Jantjies and Popovac (2011)	Explore girls' perceptions and experiences of crime and violence within their communities and the gender dynamics that shape these experiences.	South Africa (Western Cape)	Gang violence, domestic violence, sexual violence	Gender norms, masculinity, poverty, substance abuse, community safety	School-going girls (ages 14–17).	Qualitative research using focus group discussions
23.	Jeke et al. (2021)	Analyse the relationship between crime and economic development in South Africa.	South Africa	Gang-related and economic crimes	Crime, economic development	South African population	Panel data analysis
24.	Katz-Lavigne et al. (2024)	To analyse the criminalisation of small-scale mining and the rise of machete gangs in Zimbabwe.	Zimbabwe	Resource-driven gang violence, illegal trade	Economic deprivation, artisanal mining	Small-scale miners and community members	Mixed-methods: case studies and document review
25.	Kelly and Ward (2020)	To investigate narratives of gang disengagement among former members in South Africa.	South Africa	Organised crime, gang-related violence	Apartheid legacy, socio-economic marginalisation	Former gang members	Qualitative interviews
26.	Khosa and Abdulkareem (2023)	Present strategies to overcome violent conflicts hindering social cohesion and progress.	South Africa	Violent conflict and gang-related violence	Social cohesion, violent conflict and progress	South African communities	Qualitative policy analysis
27.	Kynoch (2005)	To analyse the complex relationship between crime, conflict and politics during South Africa's transition from apartheid.	South Africa	Political violence, criminal violence, state-sponsored violence	security force involvement in crime, the blurring of political and criminal motives	Political organisations (ANC, IFP), state security forces, criminal gangs	Historical analysis
28.	(Jensen, 2008)	To explore how gangs in Cape Town provide a form of 'violent social capital' and act as an alternative form of governance in marginalized communities.	South Africa (Cape Town)	Criminal gang violence, territorial control	Social exclusion, state failure, governance, social capital	Gang members and residents in a Cape Town township	Ethnographic research
29.	Lindegard and Gear (2014)	To examine the role of prison gangs in maintaining safety through violence in South African prisons.	South Africa	Prison violence, hierarchical gang control	Apartheid prison system	Inmates and prison officials	Ethnographic research
30.	Loqani and Magadze (2022)	Explore factors contributing to mob justice.	Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, South Africa	Vigilante mob violence	Community distrust in law enforcement, socio-economic deprivation	Residents of Gqeberha	Exploratory and case study analysis

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## Appendix B. Continued

S/N	First author and year	Primary objective	Study location	Type of gang violence	Socio-economic factor/aspect explored	Study population	Method
31.	Macamo (2016)	To analyse the historical and social roots of violence in Mozambique's political culture.	Mozambique	Political violence, civil war violence everyday violence	state formation, post-colonial governance	Mozambican society, political elites	Theoretical and historical analysis
32.	Machava (2011)	Analyse the post-independence state discourse on internal security and the politics of punishment and social deviancy.	Mozambique	State-sponsored violence	political legitimacy, social control, public punishment	'Deviant' or 'unproductive' individuals,	Historical analysis of state documents and media
33.	Machethe and Mofokeng (2022)	To assess how illicit drug networks affect law enforcement efficiency in South Africa.	South Africa	Drug trade and related violence	Corruption and Its Impact on Law Enforcement	Law enforcement agencies and urban gangs	Mixed methods, including case studies
34.	Madibana et al. (2020)	Explore challenges faced by emerging aquaculture entrepreneurs in South Africa and potential solutions.	South Africa	Not gang-related, but related to economic hardship	Economic hardship, entrepreneurship and resource scarcity	Emerging aquaculture entrepreneurs	Qualitative interviews
35.	Marawako (2022)	To investigate the triggers and effects of machete violence in Zimbabwe.	Zimbabwe	Machete violence in illegal gold mining	Economic instability and informal mining.	Illegal miners and rural communities.	Mixed methods, including interviews
36.	Maringira and Gukurume (2020)	To investigate youth violence, political mobilisation and patronage in Zimbabwe.	Zimbabwe	Intimidation, political violence	Youth patronage, unemployment	Politically mobilised youth	APN working papers
37.	Maringira and Masiya (2018)	Explore the reasons for the persistence of youth gang violence in post-apartheid South Africa.	South Africa	Youth gang violence, criminal activities	Socio-economic inequalities, poverty, unemployment, breakdown of family structures, political manipulation.	Youth gang members	Literature review, theoretical analysis
38.	Matanzima et al. (2024)	Examine natural resource-based conflicts in Zimbabwe, including illegal mining by gangs.	Zimbabwe	Resource-based gang violence	Natural resource conflicts, gang control over resources	Zimbabwean rural communities	Case study analysis
39.	Mkodzongi (2020)	To assess the rise of machete gangs ( <i>Mashurugwi</i> ) in Zimbabwe's artisanal mining sector.	Zimbabwe	Resource-based violence, illegal mining conflicts	Economic collapse, informal mining sector	Artisanal miners	Participant observation and interviews
40.	Mlambo and Masuku (2022)	Analyse insurgency in Mozambique and its implications for the SADC.	Northern Mozambique	Insurgency and organised crime	Economic marginalisation and regional instability	Affected local populations	Secondary data and policy reviews
41.	Mmakwena et al. (2023)	Examining corruption within the traffic police environment and proposing solutions.	South Africa	Indirect contribution to gang-related violence through corruption	Institutional corruption, law enforcement inefficiencies	Traffic police officers, public stakeholders	Qualitative analysis, case studies
42.	Moyo (2020)	Analyse political militias' role in Zimbabwe's opposition politics.	Zimbabwe	Political violence and intimidation	Historical role of militias and party-aligned foot-soldiers	ZANU-PF and opposition members	Historical and political analysis
43.	Murambadoro et al. (2020)	Understanding justice from an African perspective beyond restorative justice.	South Africa, African context	Gang violence, restorative justice	Cultural perspectives on justice, reconciliation	African communities, justice professionals	Theoretical analysis, literature review
44.	Murhula and Tolla (2021)	Evaluating the effectiveness of restorative justice on victims.	South Africa	Victims of gang violence, restorative justice	Healing, reconciliation, victim-offender relationships	Victims of crime, justice professionals	Qualitative interviews, case study
45.	Mwonzora and Helliker (2020)	Understand youth participation in ZANU-PF's 2008 election violence.	Zimbabwe	Political violence during elections	Political manipulation, youth unemployment and militia tactics	ZANU-PF youth members	Qualitative interviews and archival research

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## Appendix B. Continued

S/N	First author and year	Primary objective	Study location	Type of gang violence	Socio-economic factor/aspect explored	Study population	Method
46.	Ngwenya (2017)	Address post-conflict trauma through participatory action research.	Zimbabwe	Ethnic and political violence	Ethnic tensions, political violence	Gukuruhundi survivors	Participatory action research
47.	Petrus (2015)	Analyse the phenomenon of vigilantism and the existence of street gangs as forms of resistance against a perceived illegitimate and ineffective post-apartheid state.	South Africa	street gang violence, Vigilantism	State legitimacy, social control, resistance against the state	Vigilante groups, street gangs	Theoretical and conceptual analysis
48.	Petrus et al. (2022)	Re-thinking punitive approaches to addressing gang subcultures.	South Africa	Gang subcultures, organised crime	Socio-economic determinants of gang membership	South African communities affected by gang violence	Qualitative analysis, theoretical exploration
49.	Ragolane and Khoza (2024)	Examine challenges faced by the government in addressing organised crime in South Africa.	South Africa	Organised crime, gang violence	Organised crime, government response, policy challenges	South African government and law enforcement	Policy analysis
50.	Raleigh (2016)	Explain the rise of political militias across Africa, particularly about gang violence.	Africa (including Zimbabwe)	Political militia and gang violence	Political militias, violence, political manipulation	African populations affected by militias	Quantitative and qualitative analysis
51.	Ras (2023)	Analyse the role of NGOs in preventing violent extremism and gang violence in Mozambique.	Mozambique	Gang violence and violent extremism	Role of NGOs, prevention of violent extremism	NGOs, Mozambican youth	Qualitative interviews
52.	Sampaio (2024)	Explore the effects of urbanisation on peace and security, especially in gang-related contexts.	Mozambique	Urbanisation-driven gang violence	Urbanisation, inequality, peace and security	Urban youth in Mozambique	Qualitative research
53.	Sayed (2022)	Understand how different forms of political violence have shaped Mozambican democracy and citizens' engagement with it.	Mozambique	police violence, political party violence (RENAMO vs. FRELIMO).	Fear, democracy, political participation,	Mozambican citizens, political party members	Qualitative research
54.	Tofa (2020)	Examine political changes and their implications on the Zimbabwean 'new dispensation'.	Zimbabwe	Political violence, state control	Political change, governance and its impact on public life	Zimbabwean citizens	Qualitative analysis
55.	van der Linde (2022)	Examine the proliferation of gang activities and the legislative/policy responses.	Cape Flats, South Africa	Criminal gang violence in urban areas	Impact of legislative and policy frameworks on gang operations	South African legal and law enforcement systems	Qualitative analysis of legal and policy documents
56.	Van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo (2021)	Explore youth alternatives to gang involvement.	Cape Flats, South Africa	Gang recruitment and Social Involvement	Social exclusion, youth unemployment and poverty	Youth in Cape Flats	Case studies and interviews
58.	Vorvornator (2024)	To explore the border securitisation processes and their links to gang-related cross-border crimes.	South Africa	Cross-border crimes, trafficking	Border securitisation, post-apartheid dynamics	Cross-border communities	Mixed-methods: policy and field analysis
59.	Vuninga (2020)	Investigate youth gang culture and power dynamics in intimate relationships in South Africa.	South Africa	Gang-related violence and intimate violence	Youth gang culture, power dynamics, social issues	South African youth	Qualitative study
60.	Compton (2018)	To explore the role of violence in community formation and political mobilisation in Zimbabwe.	Zimbabwe	Politically motivated violence, gang control	Post-colonial political instability	Rural and urban communities	Mixed methods: historical and ethnographic

Source: Authors' construction (2025).