

Construction Extortion in South Africa: A Qualitative Study of Its Nature, Persistence, and Criminal Justice Challenges in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

Construction extortion poses a serious threat to infrastructure development and economic growth in South Africa, particularly in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. This study investigated the nature and prevalence of construction extortion, the drivers sustaining the phenomenon, and the challenges faced by the criminal justice system in addressing it effectively. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 21 participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants included investigators from the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, South African Police Service Crime Intelligence officials, construction industry managers, and community leaders. Data were analyzed thematically and interpreted through Routine Activity Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, and Rational Choice Theory. The findings reveal that construction extortion has evolved into an organized criminal activity marked by threats, violence, project delays, and the manipulation of localization requirements. The study recommends enhanced inter-agency cooperation, intelligence-led policing, stronger witness protection measures, and clearer procurement and localization frameworks to improve prevention and prosecution outcomes.

Keywords: construction extortion, organized crime, infrastructure development, law enforcement, infrastructure security.

1. Introduction

The construction sector is a key contributor to South Africa's socio-economic development through infrastructure delivery, employment creation, and economic growth (Construction Industry Development Board [CIDB], 2025). Although recent government infrastructure programs have reinforced its importance for economic recovery, criminal activities at construction sites increasingly threaten project implementation (South African Government News Agency, 2024).

Construction extortion, commonly known as the “construction mafia,” has emerged as one of the sector's most serious challenges. Originating in KwaZulu-Natal before spreading to other provinces, these groups use intimidation, violence, extortion, and project disruptions to obtain financial gains or unlawful participation in construction projects (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). Their activities have delayed infrastructure delivery, increased project costs, and weakened investor confidence (Nene-Matlou, 2023). Since 2019, more than 180 infrastructure projects

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valued at over R63 billion have reportedly been disrupted by construction-related criminal activities (South African Government News Agency, 2024), with far-reaching consequences for economic development and public confidence in government (Nene-Matlou, 2023).

Official statistics further highlight the scale of the problem. Between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2024, South Africa recorded 6,056 extortion cases. Gauteng accounted for 2,284 cases, resulting in 828 arrests and only 45 convictions, while KwaZulu-Natal recorded 816 cases, leading to 237 arrests and 35 convictions (Parliamentary Monitoring Group [PMG], 2024). These figures reveal a considerable gap between reported cases and successful prosecutions, raising concerns about the effectiveness of criminal justice responses (PMG, 2024).

Despite growing attention to construction extortion, existing research has focused primarily on its economic and operational impacts. Limited attention has been paid to the factors sustaining these crimes, the low prosecution and conviction rates, and comparative analyses of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, the provinces most affected by construction extortion. Addressing this gap is important for understanding weaknesses in crime prevention, investigation, prosecution, and the protection of critical infrastructure.

This study examines the extent and nature of construction extortion in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, identifies factors contributing to its persistence, and explores challenges facing criminal justice responses. Guided by criminological theory, it seeks to explain the conditions that enable construction extortion and to identify measures that can strengthen its prevention, investigation, and prosecution. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What is the extent and nature of construction extortion in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal? (2) What factors contribute to its persistence? (3) Why do relatively few cases result in successful prosecution and conviction?

This article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on construction extortion and the relevant criminological theories, outlines the research methodology, presents and discusses the findings, and concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Literature review

The growing body of literature on construction extortion highlights the increasing threat that organized extortion networks pose to infrastructure development, economic growth, and public safety in South Africa (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022; PMG, 2024). Existing scholarship has examined the origins of the phenomenon, its operational methods, and its broader impact on construction projects and local communities. Studies have also drawn attention to the significant financial costs associated with project disruptions, as well as the challenges encountered by law-enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system in responding effectively to these crimes (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). Against this backdrop, the following review explores three key themes relevant to the study: the emergence and spread of construction extortion in South Africa, the nature and characteristics of the phenomenon, and the law-enforcement and prosecution challenges that have contributed to its persistence.

2.1 *Construction extortion in South Africa*

Construction extortion, often referred to in public discourse as the “construction mafia,” has emerged as one of the most significant threats to infrastructure delivery in South Africa. The phenomenon generally involves organized groups that disrupt construction projects through intimidation, violence, threats, coercion, or demands for financial payments, employment opportunities, subcontracting arrangements, or a percentage of project value (Irish-Qhobosheane,

2022). Evidence suggests that many construction extortion groups operate under the guise of local business forums or community organizations, using claims of local economic participation to legitimize demands for subcontracting opportunities or financial payments. In many instances, however, these activities extend beyond legitimate community interests and constitute organized criminal extortion (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022; PMG, 2024; Corrigan, 2024).

The emergence of construction extortion is commonly traced to KwaZulu-Natal, where organized groups began targeting construction projects around 2015 before expanding into other provinces. Irish-Qhobosheane (2022) argues that the phenomenon developed within a broader context of economic exclusion, high unemployment, and perceptions that local communities were not benefiting adequately from infrastructure development projects. Over time, however, many of these activities evolved into organized systems of extortion characterized by threats, project disruptions, and violence against contractors and workers (Corrigan, 2024).

Research found that at least 183 infrastructure and construction projects worth more than R63 billion had been affected by disruptions linked to construction extortion by 2019 (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). These disruptions have continued across the country, affecting both public and private sector developments (Lekoko, Sebatane & Molebeleli, 2026).

Recent parliamentary reports indicate that extortion has become increasingly organized and diversified (PMG, 2024). While construction sites remain a primary target, similar tactics are now reported in sectors including transport, mining, security, municipal procurement, and township businesses. The expansion of extortion beyond construction suggests that criminal groups have adapted their activities and exploited weaknesses in governance, law enforcement, and economic regulation (Thorne, 2024).

2.2 Nature and characteristics of construction extortion

Existing literature identifies several recurring characteristics of construction extortion. One of the most prominent is the demand for the implementation of the so-called “30% rule,” which originates from procurement transformation policies intended to promote participation by historically disadvantaged groups in public projects (Lekoko et al., 2026; Corrigan, 2024). Criminal groups frequently invoke this policy to justify demands for subcontracting opportunities, employment quotas, or direct financial payments from contractors, irrespective of legal procurement processes.

The methods used by extortion groups often include intimidation of contractors and project managers, forced site closures, destruction of property, sabotage of equipment, armed threats, and violence against workers (CIDB, 2024). In some instances, contractors reportedly agree to extortion demands because they perceive compliance to be less costly than prolonged delays, project stoppages, or threats to personal safety (Association of South African Quantity Surveyors [ASAQS], 2022).

Another important characteristic is the localized nature of these networks. Although extortion groups often operate within specific communities, evidence suggests the existence of broader organizational structures that facilitate coordination across projects and geographical areas (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project [OCCRP], 2022). Such arrangements increase these groups’ capacity to maintain pressure on contractors and resist law-enforcement intervention.

2.3 Law-enforcement and prosecution challenges

Despite increasing public concern and extensive reporting, successful prosecution of extortion cases remains limited. The Portfolio Committee on Police reported that thousands of extortion cases were recorded between 2019 and 2024, yet only a relatively small proportion resulted in convictions (Thorne, 2024; PMG, 2024). This discrepancy suggests challenges throughout the criminal justice process, including reporting, investigations, witness protection, evidence gathering, and prosecution.

A key challenge involves victim cooperation. Extortion victims often fear retaliation if they provide evidence against perpetrators. Since extortion frequently relies on intimidation and threats, witnesses may withdraw complaints or refuse to participate in prosecutions (Thorne, 2024). Such dynamics make successful criminal proceedings difficult, even where law-enforcement agencies identify suspects.

Researchers have also pointed to weaknesses in inter-agency coordination and state responses. Irish-Qhobosheane (2022) argues that inconsistent law-enforcement interventions have contributed to the growth of extortion networks by allowing criminal groups to establish themselves before decisive action is taken. Parliamentary reports similarly emphasize the need for coordinated collaboration among the South African Police Service (SAPS), Crime Intelligence, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), and other stakeholders (Democratic Alliance [DA], 2024).

The persistence of construction extortion therefore cannot be explained solely by offender behavior. It also reflects broader institutional, social, and economic conditions that create opportunities for extortion while simultaneously limiting the effectiveness of criminal justice responses.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is informed by three criminological theories: Routine Activity Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, and Rational Choice Theory. Together, these perspectives provide insight into the opportunities, environmental conditions, and decision-making processes that contribute to construction extortion.

3.1 Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory was developed by Cohen and Felson (1979) to explain how crime occurs when three elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship. According to the theory, crime is less dependent on offender characteristics than on opportunities created by everyday social arrangements (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

Applied to construction extortion, infrastructure projects represent highly attractive targets because they involve substantial financial resources, expensive equipment, contractual obligations, and strict completion deadlines. Extortion groups often understand that delays can be extremely costly for contractors, making projects particularly vulnerable to coercive demands (Armstrong & Meyer, 2023). At the same time, weak security measures, inadequate policing, and limited on-site protection reduce effective guardianship. Routine Activity Theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding why construction projects become recurring targets and why extortion continues where opportunities outweigh perceived risks.

3.2 Social Disorganization Theory

Social Disorganization Theory originates from the Chicago School tradition and proposes that crime is more likely to occur in communities characterized by poverty, unemployment, social instability, weak institutions, and limited informal social control (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Sampson & Wilson, 1995). The theory is particularly relevant to construction extortion because many affected communities experience persistent socio-economic deprivation. High unemployment and perceptions of exclusion from economic opportunities may create an environment in which extortion groups can recruit members, gain local support, or justify their activities as forms of economic redress (OCCRP, 2022).

Furthermore, where communities experience weak relationships with state institutions, criminal groups may establish alternative forms of authority and influence. Such conditions reduce community willingness to cooperate with law enforcement and may strengthen the social legitimacy of extortion networks. Social Disorganization Theory therefore helps explain how local environmental conditions contribute to the emergence and endurance of construction extortion.

3.3 Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory argues that offenders make decisions by weighing anticipated benefits against potential costs. Criminal behavior is therefore viewed as a purposive and calculated response rather than a purely impulsive act (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). From this perspective, construction extortion can be understood as a strategic activity in which offenders seek financial gain while assessing the likelihood of arrest, prosecution, and punishment. The low number of convictions relative to reported extortion cases may reduce the perceived risks associated with participation in extortion networks (Thorne, 2024). Where expected rewards exceed anticipated consequences, criminal involvement becomes more attractive. The theory also helps explain the behavior of victims. Contractors may choose to comply with extortion demands because they calculate that paying a demanded amount is less costly than enduring prolonged project disruptions, legal disputes, damage to equipment, or threats to employee safety (Olapade, Agumba & Muthelo, 2025).

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the nature, causes, and persistence of construction extortion in South Africa. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted in selected districts and metropolitan municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal (uMgungundlovu, Ugu, uMkhanyakude, Zululand, and eThekweni) and Gauteng (Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Ekurhuleni), as these areas have experienced persistent construction-related extortion and project disruptions.

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 21 purposively and snowball-selected participants comprising five Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (DPCI) investigators, five SAPS Crime Intelligence officials, eight construction industry managers, and three community leaders. Law enforcement participants included detective commanders, crime intelligence commanders, analysts, and information management officials with between five and more than twenty years of experience in organized crime investigations. Construction participants occupied managerial positions in private and public sector organizations and possessed extensive experience in infrastructure development within Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Community participants were Community Policing Forum

representatives, traditional leadership advisers, and business forum leaders with substantial knowledge of local extortion-related challenges. Participants represented diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of age, race, gender, and professional experience.

Participants were selected because of their direct knowledge and experience of construction extortion. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of information-rich participants, while snowball sampling facilitated access to individuals working within a sensitive and difficult-to-reach environment (Benoot, Hannes & Bilsen, 2016; Heckathorn, 2011). Eligibility criteria required law enforcement participants to have experience investigating organized crime and extortion, construction industry participants to occupy senior or managerial positions with direct exposure to project disruptions, and community leaders to possess extensive knowledge of extortion-related issues within their communities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English at locations convenient to participants. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with probing questions where necessary to obtain detailed responses. Secondary data, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications, parliamentary reports, industry reports, policy documents, and other credible sources, were also reviewed to contextualize the findings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018). Interview transcripts were read repeatedly, systematically coded, and grouped into categories that were refined into broader themes and sub-themes. The themes were continuously reviewed against the original data to ensure consistency and credibility. This iterative analytical process enhanced the trustworthiness and dependability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fouché, Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021).

5. Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles governing social science research to ensure the protection of participants, the integrity of the research process, and the credibility of the findings. Researchers have an ethical responsibility to treat participants with respect and fairness while ensuring that findings are reported honestly and accurately (De Vos et al., 2011). The study further adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice as outlined National Health Research Ethics Council [NHREC], (2024) and the Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC] (2019).

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) institutional Research Ethics Committee. In addition, because the study involved members of the SAPS, formal research approval was obtained from SAPS in accordance with SAPS National Instruction 4 of 2022, which regulates research conducted within the organization. The study complied with all conditions stipulated in the approval, including conducting the study without disrupting official duties and maintaining the confidentiality of information obtained from SAPS personnel.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Consistent with the principle of respect for persons, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, the anticipated duration of the interviews, and their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences (NHREC, 2024; HSRC, 2019). No incentives were offered to influence participation. This ensured that participation was free from coercion or undue influence.

Before each interview commenced, participants provided written informed consent after receiving sufficient information about the study and having an opportunity to ask questions.

Informed consent is recognized as a fundamental requirement of ethical research because it respects participants' autonomy and ensures that they make voluntary and informed decisions regarding their involvement in research (De Vos et al., 2011; NHREC, 2024).

Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were maintained throughout the study. To protect participant identities, no names or personally identifiable information were included in interview transcripts, data analysis, or the presentation of findings. Instead, participants were assigned unique identification codes (P1-P21), which were used throughout the study. All information provided by participants was treated as strictly confidential and used solely for academic purposes. These measures align with recognized ethical standards regarding privacy and confidentiality in social research (Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; HSRC, 2019).

Given the sensitive nature of construction extortion and organized crime, particular attention was paid to the principle of non-maleficence, which requires researchers to minimize the risk of harm to participants (Anderson & Corneli, 2017; Farrimond, 2013). The interview schedule and research procedures were subjected to ethical review by both TUT and SAPS before approval was granted. Participants were informed that they were not obliged to answer any question that caused discomfort.

The principle of beneficence also informed the study. Beneficence requires that research should maximize potential benefits while minimizing risks to participants and society (NHREC, 2024). While every effort was made to protect participants from harm, the study also sought to contribute to a better understanding of construction extortion in South Africa, with potential benefits for policymakers, law-enforcement agencies, the construction industry, and affected communities through the development of evidence-based interventions.

To safeguard the confidentiality and integrity of the data, all interview recordings, consent forms, and transcripts were stored electronically in password-protected files accessible only to those who are officially authorized. The original recordings were preserved without alteration to ensure the authenticity of participants' accounts. In accordance with TUT research data management requirements, the collected data will be securely retained and disposed of according to institutional policies. These procedures ensured compliance with accepted standards of responsible research conduct and data management (HSRC, 2019; NHREC, 2024).

6. Findings

6.1 *Research question 1: What is the extent and nature of construction extortion in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal?*

The first research question sought to determine the extent and nature of construction extortion within the selected districts and metropolitan municipalities of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Participants across all stakeholder groups agreed that construction extortion has become widespread and deeply entrenched in both provinces. Although respondents frequently identified KwaZulu-Natal as the province where the phenomenon initially gained prominence, they indicated that Gauteng has experienced a significant increase in extortion-related activities in recent years.

Participants described construction extortion as an organised form of criminal activity characterised by intimidation, coercion, threats of violence, project disruptions, forced subcontracting arrangements, protection-fee demands, and attempts to secure a percentage of project value. These activities were reported to affect a range of public and private infrastructure projects, including road construction, housing developments, municipal infrastructure, and other large-scale construction initiatives.

A DPCI participant from KwaZulu-Natal explained:

“A crime whereby organized crime groups use violence and intimidation to force their way into a construction project. It's a crime of organized people forcing themselves on others to get the 30%.” (P5).

Similarly, a construction industry participant from Gauteng described extortion as:

“It is using unnecessary power to take over a project that you don't qualify for.” (P11).

Another participant added:

“They want to take over the project by demanding a certain amount of money or 30% of the stake in the project.” (P13).

Participants further indicated that construction extortion has evolved from isolated incidents into highly organised networks capable of systematically targeting projects. According to several respondents, extortion groups often possess prior knowledge of planned developments and tender awards, enabling them to approach projects before construction activities commence.

As one participant observed:

“They are always two steps ahead before the construction even comes.” (P6).

The findings also revealed that extortion groups employ various methods to compel compliance, including threats, intimidation, vandalism, theft, project invasions, work stoppages, and violence. Some construction managers indicated that contractors occasionally comply with demands because project delays and security risks can have severe financial consequences.

One participant explained:

“If the person doesn't pay, they will steal or vandalize the property.” (P14).

Participants from KwaZulu-Natal consistently described construction extortion as particularly pervasive within the province.

As one respondent stated:

“It is very rife, it has grown at a very ugly speed; it is something that cannot be ignored.” (P21)

The findings suggest that construction extortion has developed into a sophisticated and organized criminal enterprise that affects infrastructure delivery, project implementation, and economic development across both provinces.

6.2 Research question 2: What factors contribute to the persistence of construction extortion in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal?

The second research question explored the factors that contribute to the persistence of construction extortion. Participants identified a range of interconnected socio-economic, institutional, political, and criminal factors that enable extortion activities to continue despite law-enforcement interventions.

One of the most frequently identified factors was greed and the pursuit of financial gain. Participants believed that many individuals and groups engage in extortion because it provides an opportunity to obtain economic benefits without competing through legitimate business processes.

A participant explained:

“Greediness... people do not want to share. They want to monopolize businesses.” (P17).

Several respondents similarly referred to greed and self-interest as key motivations underpinning extortion activities. In addition, participants identified unemployment, poverty, and economic marginalization as important contextual factors. Many respondents argued that communities characterized by high levels of unemployment are particularly vulnerable to the emergence of extortion groups, especially where local residents perceive that they are excluded from economic opportunities associated with infrastructure projects.

Political interference and corruption were also repeatedly identified as contributing to the persistence of extortion. Participants expressed concerns that some political actors, local government officials, and individuals involved in procurement processes either facilitate extortion activities or fail to address them effectively.

One participant remarked:

"The political system and the councilors create the problem." (P19).

Another participant added:

"Councilors have their own companies and also want to benefit from the 30%." (P21).

Participants further identified ambiguities relating to localization and community participation requirements as creating opportunities for criminal exploitation. While respondents generally supported efforts to promote local economic participation, they argued that uncertainty regarding beneficiary eligibility has enabled criminal groups to justify unlawful demands.

One participant explained:

"The phrase 'local people' was vague... It did not indicate who qualifies to receive the 30%." (P15).

The findings therefore suggest that the persistence of construction extortion cannot be attributed to a single cause. Rather, it is sustained by a combination of economic incentives, socio-economic challenges, corruption, political influence, and weaknesses in regulatory and procurement processes.

6.3 Research Question 3: Why do relatively few construction extortion cases result in successful prosecution and conviction?

The third research question focused on understanding why relatively few construction extortion cases result in successful prosecution and conviction.

Participants consistently pointed to fear and intimidation as major obstacles to criminal investigations and prosecutions. Construction managers, community leaders, and law-enforcement officials indicated that many victims are unwilling to report incidents or testify against perpetrators because they fear violent retaliation.

One construction industry participant stated:

"I have four cases that I have not reported to the police due to fear for my employees' lives." (P18).

Another participant remarked:

"If you like to report, you die fast... They will know before sunset that you are the one who reported." (P20).

Participants explained that witness intimidation often results in victims withdrawing complaints or refusing to cooperate with investigations. This significantly limits the ability of law-enforcement agencies to gather evidence capable of supporting successful prosecutions.

Participants also identified weaknesses within the criminal justice system. Several participants referred to limited investigative resources, delays in investigations, inadequate intelligence gathering, and challenges associated with coordinating responses among relevant institutions.

One participant commented:

“People have lost confidence in the police.” (P2).

Law-enforcement participants further indicated that organized extortion groups have become increasingly sophisticated and adaptive. Their ability to gather information, intimidate witnesses, and evade detection often places investigators at a disadvantage during criminal investigations. In addition, participants suggested that corruption within some sectors of government and local administration may undermine enforcement efforts and weaken the effectiveness of anti-extortion initiatives. The findings therefore suggest that low prosecution and conviction rates are linked to multiple challenges, including witness intimidation, underreporting, fear of retaliation, limited investigative capacity, institutional weaknesses, and the organized nature of extortion networks. Together, these factors reduce the likelihood that reported cases will progress successfully through the criminal justice system.

7. Discussion of findings

This section discusses the findings in relation to the research questions, existing literature, and the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The discussion focuses on the extent and nature of construction extortion, the factors contributing to its persistence, and the challenges associated with prosecution and conviction. The findings are interpreted through the lens of Routine Activity Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, and Rational Choice Theory to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

7.1 The extent and nature of construction extortion in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal

The findings revealed that construction extortion has become a widespread and organized criminal activity in both Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Participants consistently described the phenomenon as involving intimidation, coercion, threats, violence, project disruptions, and unlawful demands for financial benefits, employment opportunities, subcontracting arrangements, or a percentage of project value. These findings support previous research that characterizes construction extortion as a form of organized crime that targets infrastructure projects through systematic intimidation and coercion (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022).

Participants reported that construction extortion affects both public and private sector projects and has evolved beyond isolated incidents into highly organized criminal networks. This finding is consistent with Irish-Qhobosheane's (2022) observation that construction-related extortion has expanded from localized disruptions in KwaZulu-Natal to a national threat affecting infrastructure projects across South Africa. The finding that extortion groups often possess prior knowledge of projects before construction begins further suggests a level of organization and information gathering that extends beyond opportunistic criminal behavior.

The results also indicate that construction extortion has become embedded within some local environments, particularly in areas where infrastructure projects represent significant economic opportunities. Participants frequently referred to demands for "30%" participation, subcontracting opportunities, and local employment. Although some respondents recognized the legitimacy of economic transformation and local participation objectives, they argued that criminal groups exploit these policies to justify unlawful conduct. Similar observations have been

made in previous studies, which suggest that extortion groups frequently appropriate transformation discourse to legitimise criminal demands (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022).

Routine Activity Theory provides a useful framework for understanding these findings. Cohen and Felson (1979) argue that crime occurs when motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians converge in space and time. Construction projects constitute attractive targets because they involve substantial financial resources, strict completion deadlines, expensive equipment, and contractual obligations. Participants' accounts of organized groups targeting projects before construction activities commence suggest that offenders actively identify opportunities where substantial benefits may be obtained. At the same time, weaknesses in project security and enforcement mechanisms reduce capable guardianship, thereby increasing opportunities for extortion. The high concentration of infrastructure projects within Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal may therefore create conditions that make these provinces particularly vulnerable to organized extortion.

7.2 Factors contributing to the persistence of construction extortion

The findings indicate that construction extortion persists because of the interaction of multiple socio-economic, political, institutional, and criminal factors. Participants identified greed, unemployment, poverty, economic exclusion, corruption, political interference, policy ambiguities, and weaknesses in law enforcement as key contributors to the sustainability of extortion networks. Greed and financial gain emerged as important motivating factors. Participants repeatedly described extortion as a mechanism through which individuals and groups seek economic benefits without engaging in legitimate competitive business processes. These findings support Rational Choice Theory, which suggests that offenders engage in criminal behavior when the perceived rewards outweigh the potential costs (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). The substantial financial benefits associated with construction contracts may provide strong incentives for criminal groups to target projects, particularly where the likelihood of punishment is perceived to be low.

However, the findings also suggest that economic motivations alone do not fully explain the persistence of construction extortion. Participants frequently referred to unemployment, poverty, and economic exclusion within local communities. These observations support the arguments of Irish-Qhobosheane (2022), who notes that many extortion groups emerged in contexts where local communities perceived themselves as excluded from economic benefits generated by infrastructure projects. While such conditions do not justify criminal conduct, they may create a social environment in which extortion groups recruit support and seek legitimacy.

Social Disorganization Theory provides valuable insight into this aspect of the findings. According to Shaw and McKay (1942) and Sampson and Wilson (1995), crime is more likely to emerge in communities characterized by poverty, social instability, unemployment, and weakened social institutions. Participants' descriptions of marginalized communities that perceive themselves as excluded from economic opportunities suggest that construction extortion may flourish in environments where social and economic conditions weaken community cohesion and confidence in formal institutions. Under such circumstances, criminal groups may position themselves as alternative mechanisms for accessing economic opportunities.

The findings also highlighted corruption and political interference as important enabling factors. Participants expressed concerns that some political actors and local officials either directly benefit from extortion-related activities or fail to respond effectively to them. These findings suggest that extortion is not solely a criminal justice issue but also a governance challenge.

Where political interests intersect with construction projects, accountability mechanisms may be weakened, creating opportunities for criminal groups to operate with relative impunity.

Furthermore, participants identified ambiguities surrounding localization and community participation requirements as contributing to construction extortion. Although transformation policies aim to promote inclusive economic development, participants argued that uncertainty regarding the definition of legitimate beneficiaries has created opportunities for criminal exploitation. This finding reinforces previous arguments that policy implementation gaps may unintentionally facilitate extortion-related activities (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). These findings demonstrate that construction extortion persists because of the interaction of individual motivations, socio-economic conditions, governance weaknesses, and institutional shortcomings. These factors collectively create an environment in which extortion can become normalized and difficult to eradicate.

7.3 Challenges associated with prosecution and conviction

The findings revealed that relatively few construction extortion cases result in successful prosecution and conviction due to several interconnected challenges. Participants consistently identified fear, intimidation, underreporting, witness non-cooperation, limited investigative capacity, and low confidence in law-enforcement agencies as major obstacles to effective criminal justice responses. Fear emerged as the most significant challenge. Construction managers and community leaders reported reluctance to report incidents because of concerns for their personal safety, the safety of their employees, and the possibility of retaliation by extortion groups. This finding aligns with the PMG (2024) observations regarding the role of intimidation and fear in undermining the reporting and successful prosecution of extortion-related offences.

The findings further revealed that witness intimidation often affects the quality and availability of evidence. Participants indicated that victims may withdraw complaints, refuse to testify, or avoid cooperating with investigators due to fear of reprisals. This creates substantial challenges for prosecutors who rely on witness testimony and supporting evidence to secure convictions. As a result, many cases fail to progress through the criminal justice system despite initial reports being made. The findings also point to institutional challenges within law-enforcement agencies. Participants referred to limited resources, investigative delays, and capacity constraints as factors reducing the effectiveness of criminal investigations. These observations correspond with concerns raised in the extant literature regarding the difficulties associated with investigating organized criminal networks involved in extortion (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022).

Routine Activity Theory again provides a useful explanatory framework. The absence of capable guardianship extends beyond physical project sites and includes weaknesses within policing and criminal justice institutions. Where offenders perceive law-enforcement responses to be ineffective, opportunities for criminal activity increase. Similarly, Rational Choice Theory suggests that low conviction rates may reduce the perceived risks associated with extortion, making participation in criminal activities more attractive. If offenders believe that victims are unlikely to report incidents and that prosecutions are unlikely to succeed, the expected rewards of extortion become significantly greater than the anticipated costs. These findings therefore suggest that low prosecution and conviction rates are not attributable to a single weakness within the criminal justice system. Instead, they result from a combination of witness intimidation, underreporting, institutional capacity challenges, corruption concerns, and the organized nature of extortion networks. These factors collectively limit the ability of law-enforcement agencies and prosecutorial authorities to successfully disrupt and dismantle extortion syndicates.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

This study has demonstrated that construction extortion has evolved into a sophisticated form of organized crime that poses a significant threat to infrastructure development in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Participants consistently described construction extortion as involving intimidation, violence, coercion, forced subcontracting, and the manipulation of procurement and localization policies to secure unlawful financial and business benefits. The findings further reveal that the persistence of construction extortion is sustained by a complex interaction of socio-economic challenges, governance failures, corruption, political interference, and weaknesses within the criminal justice system. Fear of retaliation, limited investigative capacity, underreporting, and low levels of witness cooperation continue to undermine successful investigations, prosecutions, and convictions. Interpreted through the lenses of Routine Activity Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, and Rational Choice Theory, the findings suggest that construction extortion cannot be effectively addressed through reactive policing alone. Instead, comprehensive interventions are required to reduce criminal opportunities, strengthen institutional capacity, improve governance, and address the underlying conditions that facilitate organised criminal activity.

The study therefore recommends a coordinated, multi-sectoral response involving law enforcement agencies, government departments, the construction industry, and local communities. The South African Police Service, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, Crime Intelligence, and the National Prosecuting Authority should strengthen intelligence-led investigations, enhance information sharing, and improve inter-agency coordination to identify and disrupt organized extortion networks before they infiltrate construction projects. Government should also strengthen oversight and clarify the implementation of localization and community participation policies to prevent their exploitation by criminal groups while safeguarding their intended developmental objectives. Furthermore, witness protection measures and confidential reporting mechanisms should be enhanced to encourage victims and witnesses to cooperate with criminal investigations without fear of intimidation or retaliation. Finally, sustainable prevention strategies should address the socio-economic conditions that facilitate recruitment into extortion networks by promoting transparent local economic participation, meaningful community engagement, skills development, and employment opportunities associated with infrastructure projects. These interventions have the potential to strengthen prevention and enforcement efforts, improve prosecution outcomes, and enhance the protection of South Africa's critical infrastructure against organized construction extortion.

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