



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

JOBURGLARY

**ASSESSING THE CRIME-COUNCIL
ECOSYSTEM IN THE CITY
OF JOHANNESBURG**



OCTOBER 2026

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AG	Auditor-General
ANC	African National Congress
CBD	Central business district
CoJ	City of Johannesburg
DA	Democratic Alliance
DWS	Department of Water and Sanitation
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
GFIS	Group Forensics and Investigation Services
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
JMPD	Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department
JPC	Joburg Property Company
JRA	Johannesburg Road Agency
MMC	Member of the mayoral committee
MPAC	Municipal public accounts committee
SAPS	South African Police Service
SCOPA	Standing Committee on Public Accounts
SIU	Special Investigating Unit
SSU	Shareholder Services Unit



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the intersection between corruption and organized crime in the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) Metropolitan Municipality. It identifies a complex array of relationships and activities that blend aspects of corruption and organized crime, creating what might be best understood as a ‘crime–council ecosystem’ that exploits the machinery of local government for illicit ends.

The report sets out to answer the following questions:

- What is the interplay between corruption and organized crime in the CoJ?
- What incentives have emerged from this interplay?
- What are the enabling factors and chronology of the phenomenon?
- What are the consequences of illicit activity, particularly for governance?
- What other factors contribute towards the same outcomes (i.e. factors that do not have a connection to the CoJ or to organized crime)?

The aim is to produce a clear, systemic picture of how corruption and organized crime have affected urban governance, and to identify the key tracks by which this has come about.

Methodology

This report is a threat assessment of the connections between the city council and organized crime in Johannesburg, including corruption. In simple terms, corruption in this context is the abuse of authority by municipal officials for private gain, be it through protecting forms of organized crime, massaging tender processes towards a desired outcome, or appointing unqualified people to influence decision-making or benefit in other ways.¹ Organized crime, by contrast, refers to sustained illegal activities that involve a degree of coordination.

The boundary between the two has always been permeable. Organized crime largely depends on corruption, while institutions are always at risk of being penetrated by organized crime actors seeking a place at the high table. Recent work on the overlap between the two has included arguments that corruption is a form of organized crime.² The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has developed a definition of ‘organized corruption’ to describe this phenomenon, originally based on work in the Western Balkans.³

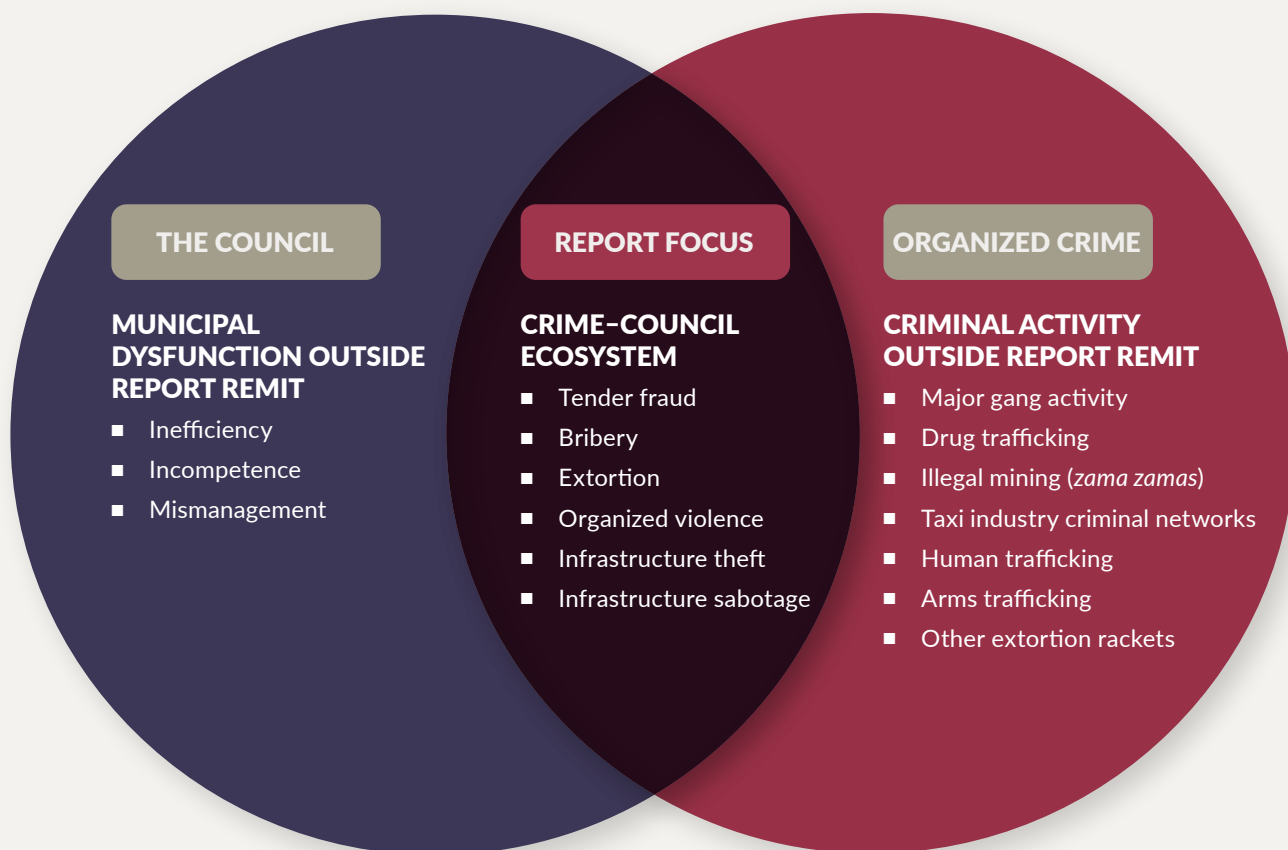


FIGURE 1 The focus of this threat assessment is the intersection between council corruption and organized crime.

Research was undertaken across all illicit markets and actors in Johannesburg, including the taxi industry, illegal mining and gangs, to identify connections to the city council. Only discovered connections are presented in this report; forms of organized crime where fieldwork and research found little or no direct connection to the city council are excluded. As such, this is not a threat assessment of the full organized crime ecosystem in Johannesburg, only a politically connected portion of it.

A blend of fieldwork, open-source desk research and historical research by the GI-TOC informs the report. Fieldwork in Johannesburg was conducted between April and June 2026, with in-depth examinations of specific illicit markets and service delivery areas.

The dozens of people interviewed were selected for their official position within the council, first-hand experience of the processes being described, lived experience (such as residents affected by water tanker contracts) or other relevant knowledge. They included academics, investigative journalists, residents of affected areas, current and former mayoral committee members and municipal employees, current and former Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department (JMPD) officers, JMPD testing centre officials and applicants, city councillors, illegal miners, Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (Hawks) officers, private investigators, members of civil society organizations and private sector employees with experience of working with the municipality. Archive GI-TOC fieldwork was used for interviews with gangsters and residents of Westbury, and for background to the city's broadband project, including interviews with former employees of the contractors involved. Researchers met most interviewees in person, with video interviews used in a handful of cases. All interviewees have been anonymized in accordance with GI-TOC practice when researching the illicit economy, due to potential safety risks.

As with all research into illicit activity, assessing qualitative information is challenging. Bias, political affiliation and point-scoring are some of the potential factors that must be borne in mind. Where possible, triangulation efforts involved open-source research or asking interviewees for official documentation. Where this was not possible but the information was deemed significant, the text contains qualifiers highlighting the lack of corroboration.

AI tools supported preliminary open-source searches, initial graphics preparation and fact-checking. All substantive information derived through AI-assisted searches was independently checked against original sources.

Key points

- Corruption and organized crime intersect in various ways in the CoJ, creating a ‘crime–council ecosystem’.
- This ecosystem has three overlapping tracks:
 - Institutional capture is the process by which government officials influence tender processes and appointments, and circumvent and undermine accountability mechanisms to steal municipal funds. This money is sometimes reinvested in the political arena.
 - Hybrid collusion between municipal officials, criminals and businesspeople facilitates access to emergency tenders and the identification of potential buildings for hijacking, and sometimes underpins extortion in construction.
 - Direct predation describes how municipal employees and contractors engage in bribery and extortion, making this track the most blatant expression of criminality.
- The ecosystem has given rise to twin vicious cycles that are rapidly compounding the problem. In the first, the decline of the city is a profit motive for corrupt and criminal syndicates, who capitalize on and sometimes exacerbate service-delivery failure to win lucrative emergency contracts. In the second, governance failure has become mutually reinforcing. Shortfalls in accountability and transparency mechanisms have enabled this ecosystem to flourish, but it is also true that the ecosystem is compounding the shortfalls.
- Much is unknown about the value and extent of the ecosystem, its connections in the city council and with provincial and national actors, and its links to Johannesburg’s main organized crime groups. What is known is enough to paint a troubling picture, especially in regard to the JMPD. For the most part, however, interactions appear to be largely financially motivated, with organized crime not yet attempting to become a serious political actor in the city council. Networks in the ecosystem are diffuse, decentralized and of varying degrees of sophistication, motivated primarily by extraction.
- The ecosystem is not solely responsible for Johannesburg’s ills, any account of which must include incompetence and inertia in the city council and the long shadow of apartheid. However, it is causing significant harm, especially in service delivery, and is a fundamental reason why purely technocratic reforms will fail.



INTRODUCTION

This report categorizes the intersection between corruption and organized crime in the CoJ according to three overlapping tracks. All are indexed to the money, mandate and/or authority of the municipality, and all undermine governance.

1. Institutional capture	2. Hybrid collusion	3. Direct predation
Government officials influence tender processes and appointments, and circumvent and undermine accountability mechanisms.	Government officials and outside actors (organized crime, businesspeople) collude to influence allocation of tenders/assets/money. Sabotage, theft and violence are allegedly sometimes a component.	Municipal officials and contractors directly engage in bribery and extortion.

FIGURE 2 The three overlapping tracks of corruption and organized crime.

The first track, and arguably the most significant, is institutionalized corruption within the CoJ that has seen the tender process fall under political influence. Through manipulation of boards and bidding processes, inflation of contract values and the insertion of intermediaries, vast amounts of public money are diverted with little work performed. This money may be pocketed for personal gain, but sometimes it is reinvested into the political arena, meaning that municipal tender fraud may have consequences for provincial or even national politics. To enable institutionalized corruption, the accountability ecosystem has been circumvented and undermined in various ways, from the capture of the boards of municipal entities to the neutering of the Group Forensics and Investigation Services (GFIS) department, the council's anti-corruption and anti-fraud watchdog.

The second track is collusion between criminals and corrupt officials in the council with responsibility for property management, water and electricity. While sharing some overlaps with institutionalized corruption – particularly in the awarding of emergency service-delivery contracts to the water mafias – hybrid collusion is distinguished by the fact that relationships generally involve a component of outright criminality in the value chain, be it sabotage or theft of critical infrastructure, the hijacking of buildings, or extortion by 'construction mafias'. In some cases, the relationship between crime and council is transactional – the exchange of insider information, for example – but in others, operations are led by syndicates that comprise municipal officials and criminals.

The third track is the most blatant expression of criminality in the municipality: direct predation through bribery and extortion. This is particularly pronounced in the JMPD and in the emerging trend of utility employees and contractors targeting customers. At a higher level, even legitimate tender winners may be shaken down by corrupt officials. Business forums offer a complex example

of extortion, targeting CoJ-appointed contractors and sometimes working in collaboration with city officials. In such cases, the CoJ becomes complicit in its own robbery.

Blurred lines and vicious cycles

The upshot of these overlapping tracks is the frequent blurring or removal of distinctions between corrupt actors and organized crime actors. In many ways, both sets of actors are playing the same game, drawing on a common playbook of violence, theft and extortion. These convergences are epitomized by the hybrid criminal syndicates that work within the 'collusion' sphere and include members of the city council, organized crime and business interests.

This crime-council ecosystem has also given rise to twin vicious cycles. The first is predicated on recurring infrastructure failure, which has created a lucrative market for emergency procurement and other tenders aimed at improving service delivery. For the most part, this is a ready-made market for corrupt and criminal actors.

Years of mismanagement, underinvestment and rampant theft have left much of Johannesburg's infrastructure in a sorry state, meaning repairs and improvement works are always needed. But there are also allegations that enterprising syndicates, particularly in the sphere of water delivery, are taking matters into their own hands, working with saboteurs or low-level thieves to damage infrastructure, giving rise to the requirement for a tender to fix the problem. The extent to which this phenomenon is prevalent in Johannesburg is unproven, but there is evidence of similar practices elsewhere in South Africa. In the water sector, there are allegations that corrupt and criminal interests that have won tenders for emergency repairs deliberately underdeliver to sustain demand for their 'services'. The upshot is worsening urban degradation and increasing criminal profits.

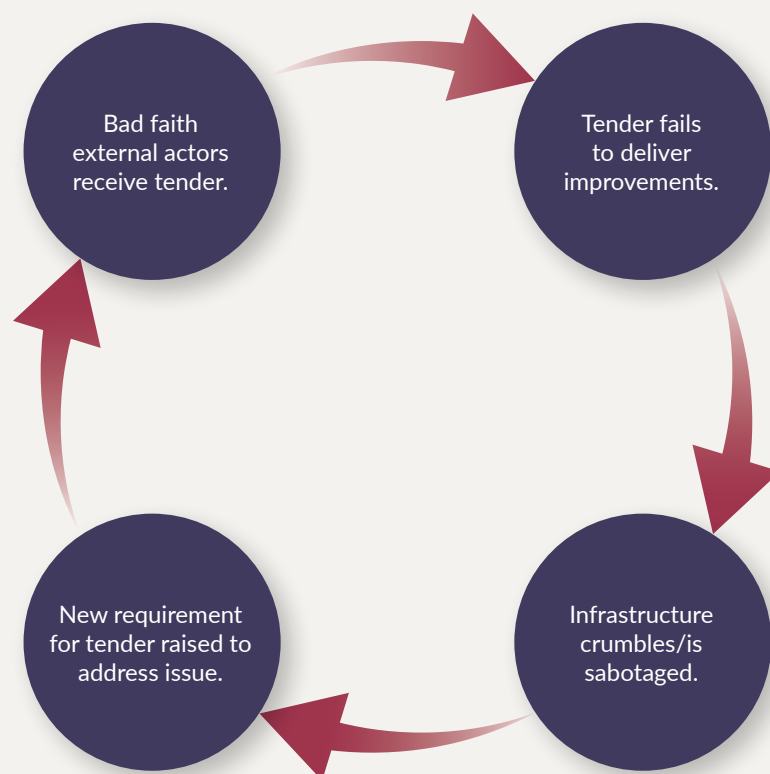


FIGURE 3 The vicious cycle of tender fraud.

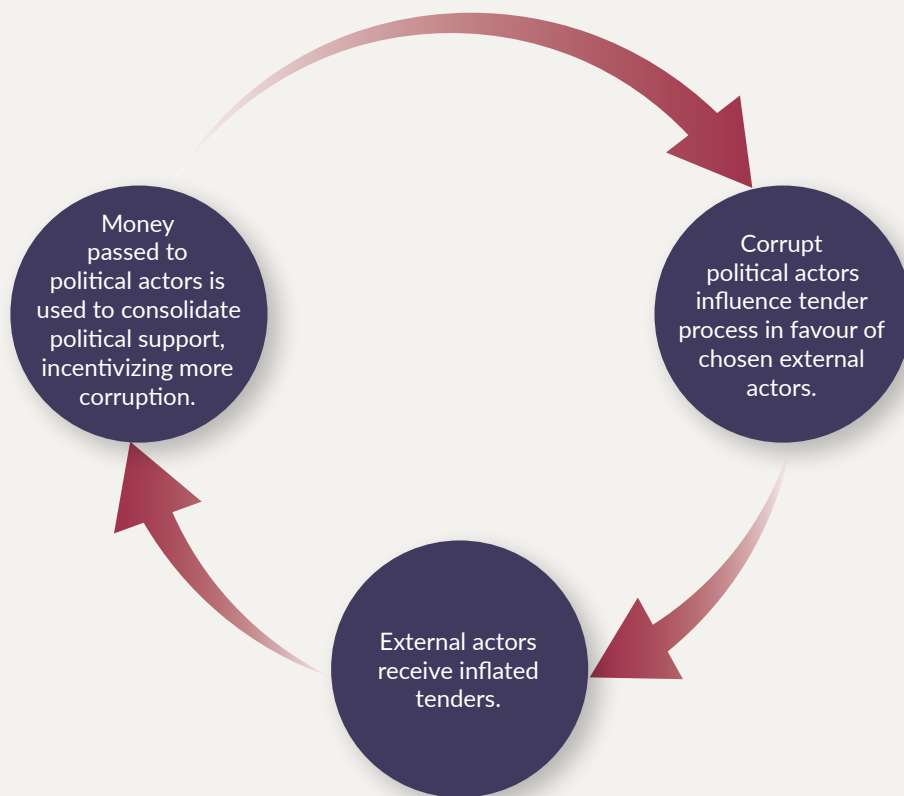


FIGURE 4 The vicious cycle of increasing politicization and eroding governance.

The second vicious cycle is that of governance and accountability. It mirrors the logic of the tender fraud cycle: poor governance allows corrupt actors to gain a foothold and enrich themselves; they then seek to manipulate or circumvent council accountability mechanisms. Money plays a key role, funnelled from tender fraud to political slush funds, where it can be used to help secure and increase political influence, giving greater access to tenders.

Perils of closer convergence

Much remains unknown about this crime–council ecosystem, so assessing its scale and ‘value’ is challenging. It is difficult to ascertain which problems stem from corruption and which from incompetence, administrative failure and infrastructure decline. Indicators such as irregular expenditure, losses of water and electricity and poor audit results are therefore inexact or compound measures of the phenomenon that aggregate other factors. GFIS data provides insight into the volume and variety of crimes involving the council, but such crimes are not disaggregated by category and details are scant.⁴

The structural relationship between this tender-driven criminal ecosystem and the broader organized crime ecosystem in Johannesburg is also unclear. The clearest overlap comes in the shape of hijacked buildings, which in many cases become havens for drug and sex trafficking by organized crime groups. The provision of violence is another strong connection. Used to protect interests and intimidate – and if necessary remove – business rivals, investigators, whistle-blowers and local politicians, violence is easily sourced in Johannesburg, be it from the taxi industry or hitmen imported from KwaZulu-Natal.⁵ Security guards protecting water and electricity infrastructure also face severe violence at the hands of thieves and saboteurs.⁶

Beyond these direct links, there are rumours and allegations of links between organized crime and the city council, including clear instances of associations and intersections between the two worlds. However, probative evidence pointing to an operational link is lacking. Ties with the main organized crime players in Johannesburg – the street gangs of the western side of the city and violent criminal networks – appear relatively weak, or at least indirect.⁷ No strong evidence of systemic relationships between the council and *zama zamas* (illegal miners) was found, beyond isolated incidents. Taxi firms similarly displayed surprisingly few linkages, aside from their grip over the city council's Bus Rapid Transit network and allegations that certain fleets of taxis are owned by JMPD officers and politicians.

As this report was going to press, however, the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System (the Madlanga Commission) had begun to expose high-level collusion between the JMPD and serious criminal actors.⁸ Beyond this, the so-called 'Big Five' cartel, identified during Madlanga as a group of major criminal actors with ties to corrupt officials, is centred in and around Johannesburg, and is held responsible for assassinations, kidnappings, tender fraud, money laundering and drug trafficking. While control of the cocaine economy in the city's clubs through cartel members has been a lucrative business, on current evidence there is limited overlap with key CoJ politicians, officials and functions.⁹ Some JMPD officers, members of the mayoral committee (MMCs) and councillors have criminal pasts or documented associations with alleged organized crime figures in the city, and sometimes both.

Such ties may at present appear fuzzy, opportunistic or indirect, but it is imperative that these areas be monitored so that closer links do not form. A true convergence between the CoJ and organized crime would transition Johannesburg away from a city with a formal governance crisis to one in which serious organized crime can secure its interests through state organs and elected officials. These convergences have been seen in the past, notably in the classic cases of New York and Chicago in the early 20th century. The 'machine politics' of these US cities was focused on securing political power through patronage networks and councillors who could secure voting blocs for their bosses. In exchange for kickbacks and campaign funds, organized crime was granted a permissive environment in which to do business, which then revolved around extortion, gambling and labour racketeering and, during Prohibition, bootlegging.

The comparison with Johannesburg a century later is not exact. In Chicago and New York in the 1930s, governance was highly corrupt and mafia-style organized crime was a direct partner in government; in Johannesburg, governance failure has opened the door to organized crime, but organized crime has not yet embedded itself as a strategic governance actor. Yet the riches on offer, which potentially outstrip all other forms of illicit activity, mean there is every reason for organized crime to entrench itself within the CoJ.

Not sufficient, but necessary

Damaging as it is, this ecosystem is not the only factor in Johannesburg's story. Incompetence, lack of political vision, long-term underinvestment and non-payment of rates have all degraded infrastructure to the point where service failure is the norm. A lack of strategy and political will, and legal issues, have held back attempts to reclaim hijacked buildings for decades. The shadow of the city's remodelling during apartheid still hangs over Johannesburg, inscribing inequality into the urban fabric. The city's population has risen rapidly over the years, placing additional strain on services and infrastructure, and poverty levels have risen too.¹⁰ And a powerful organized crime ecosystem has accelerated its decline, without any need for corrupt connections.



Hillbrow, Johannesburg, where the hijacking of buildings is a major urban challenge. As of 2026, at least 188 properties in the city centre had been hijacked. *Photo supplied*

Addressing the crime–council ecosystem will therefore not solve all of Johannesburg’s many problems, but it must form a component of any response. The ecosystem has eaten away at council accountability mechanisms and created perverse incentives by which urban decay becomes a prerequisite of profit. Attempts to rectify the situation that do not tackle the crime–council ecosystem will stand little chance of success.

In short, a major private-sector-backed intervention is required to restore accountability to Johannesburg. Data, especially near-real time public auditing of contracted services, also has a major role to play in increasing transparency and enabling detailed analysis of the inner workings of the council and the companies that bid for work. Beyond this, a coordinated campaign to reclaim the city centre from building hijackers and organized crime must be developed, as well as external and internal reform of the JMPD.

A BELEAGUERED CITY COUNCIL

To understand how the crime–council ecosystem emerged and how it operates, it is important to understand the structure of the CoJ and something of its record over the past few decades. The municipality emerged from the ashes of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, which by mid-1997 was on the verge of bankruptcy as cash reserves evaporated in the face of non-payment and 100% debt recovery budget frameworks.¹¹ Under the sweeping iGoli reforms, the structure of the council was overhauled and consolidated into the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality.¹² One of the many innovations was the creation of municipal entities – 13 in total – to manage the delivery of key services such as water and electricity and handle standalone assets such as the zoo, theatre and fresh produce market. Each would be run on corporate lines, with an executive committee and a board to hold officials accountable. MMCs would oversee the boards of entities in their portfolio areas but would not influence their constitution. In theory, the division of administrative and political functions in the sphere of ‘arm’s-length’ utilities – water, electricity and waste management – was intended as a firewall to prevent political interference and bring private sector methods to service delivery.¹³

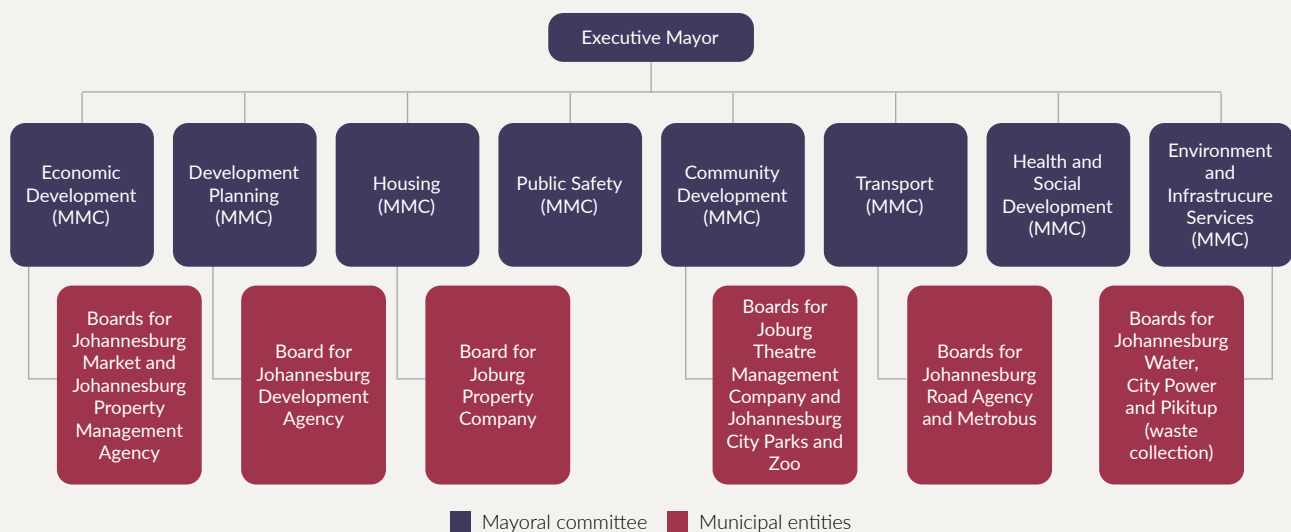


FIGURE 5 Reporting lines between the mayor of Johannesburg, mayoral committee members and municipal entities after the iGoli 2002 reforms.

SOURCE: City of Johannesburg

A period of relative stability ensued. Between 2000 and 2016, the CoJ had two mayors and three city managers. Since the African National Congress (ANC) lost its majority in the 2016 municipal elections and the city entered an era of coalition politics, however, Johannesburg has had 10 mayors or acting mayors. Today, with no voting thresholds, 18 parties are represented in the council, eight of which have only one seat.

The pattern of rapidly cycling mayors disrupts continuity in leadership, erodes institutional memory and can exacerbate governance failures and infrastructure decay, as long-term planning is constantly derailed by the short-term emphasis on political survival.¹⁴ In a briefing to Parliament's Standing Committee on Public Accounts (SCOPA), the Gauteng business unit leader of the Auditor-General (AG), Fhumulani Rabonda, flagged instability in political and administrative leadership as a core driver of non-compliance and weak oversight over service delivery.¹⁵ These sentiments were echoed by Trevor Fowler, the CoJ manager between 2011 and 2016, who said the rapid churn of mayors was at the heart of the city's problems.¹⁶

By mid-2026, the impact of these trends has come to a head. The city is afflicted by several overlapping and intersecting crises and once again finds itself on the brink of bankruptcy. Its vast new budget, underpinned by optimistic revenue projections and significant tariff increases, has faced heavy criticism. Despite a chronic cash shortfall, the budget projects a tripling of senior management over two years and an increase in board members at key utilities from 86 in 2022/2023 to 385 in 2026/2027.¹⁷ The bloated bureaucracy and excessive spending on salaries was a point of contention for opposition MPs at the AG's briefing to SCOPA on 2 June 2026, when a member of parliament claimed that 12 of the CoJ's 13 entity heads appeared to be paid above the upper limit for senior managers laid out in the Government Gazette.¹⁸ In a letter to the mayor, finance minister Enoch Godongwana criticized a R10.3 billion deal – included in the budget – struck with the South African Municipal Workers' Union to resolve a wage dispute as being 'illegal' and for not having any attached funding.¹⁹

The impact of years of chronic misgovernance can be seen everywhere in the city. Service delivery has collapsed in many areas, with taps running dry and regular power outages. Vast sums have been spent over the years on tenders that produce little improvement. To take one example, Lilian Ngoyi Street in the central business district (CBD), which was damaged by a huge explosion in 2023, remains closed to vehicles despite an estimated R215 million being spent on repairs.²⁰ (The contract to repair the road was originally given to a company then on trial for allegedly defrauding City Power.²¹) Major projects such as the Eldorado Park substation, which took nine years to construct, haemorrhage public funds and take years to complete.²² According to the mayor, the city has an infrastructure backlog in excess of R220 billion.²³

The spatial apartheid of the urban environment also remains firmly in place. White-majority suburbs continue to thrive around the hub of Sandton, while the CBD has become the new periphery.²⁴ Townships remain in the grip of criminal governance, under-policed, under-served and afflicted by systemic poverty, substance abuse and unemployment. This is a challenging situation to remedy, and one that arguably is beyond the power of any city council to resolve, even one in rude governance health. Indeed, the Constitutional Court ruled that Cape Town, often seen as a model of good governance, has failed to consider its obligation to redress spatial apartheid in its development plans.²⁵



FIGURE 6 The City of Johannesburg is characterized by extreme differences due to the legacy of apartheid.

Be that as it may, the costs of poor governance have become existential in Johannesburg. According to Professor Alex van den Heever of the Wits School of Governance, ‘corruption-related revenue loss, uncontrolled personnel expansion and structurally compromised procurement’ have put the CoJ in ‘a governance-driven financial death spiral’.²⁶



THE CRIME-COUNCIL ECOSYSTEM

The involvement of the CoJ in and with criminality is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and this report posits a three-track model to understand how it manifests. These tracks, which often overlap, may be understood as component cogs of a larger crime-council nexus that undermines service delivery, erodes trust in municipal institutions and diverts private and public money into corrupt and criminal pockets.



Water leaks in central Johannesburg. The city's fragmented governance structure has heavily affected the level of expertise and quality of service delivery. *Photo supplied*

Track one: Institutional capture

The devolved architecture of municipal entities was intended to improve service delivery through specialization. In practice, it has created fragmented governance structures, weakened accountability and enabled political capture, which in turn has facilitated large-scale tender fraud.²⁷

Capturing the boards

The appointment of board members is formally vested in the Shareholder Services Unit (SSU), with candidates selected by a panel including at least one MMC and two senior SSU managers.²⁸ This means MMCs have extensive influence over board appointments. 'It won't be open and transparent,' said one former MMC, commenting on the process of appointing new board members. 'Anyone who thinks that is naive or an idiot.'²⁹

One alleged example of this was the case of Nomoya Mnisi, who was accused in a newspaper report of influencing the appointment of board members at the Joburg Property Company (JPC), a company mandated to manage and develop the CoJ's property assets. The *Sunday Times* alleged that the board was filled with several people politically close to her, including the chair of the board who belonged to the same ANC branch as Mnisi.³⁰ (Mnisi reportedly declined to comment on the allegations and has never been found guilty of any wrongdoing.)

In a coalition government in which MMCs are often appointed on a party basis, several distinct corruption verticals may also emerge, each beholden to a different political party. This is indirectly shown by the fact that boards are usually swiftly replaced as soon as a new political administration takes over.³¹

The city manager, who acts as a non-participating municipal representative to the boards and signs all documents on behalf of the CoJ at municipal entity meetings,³² also reportedly has influence over the appointment of board members,³³ and is required to be present in board selection committees for the appointment of chief executive officers and chief financial officers.³⁴ The city manager is appointed by the council, with the selection committee that suggests potential candidates including the mayor and three to five councillors.³⁵

A clear thread through MMCs or the city manager therefore connects 'arm's-length' municipal entities with the executive level, leaving them vulnerable to political influence. In practice, this means that the executive not only controls the framework of tender processes but has indirect influence over tender awards.³⁶ According to several interviewees, this loophole has been fully exploited, to the extent that boards are now 'stacked with political appointees' who will not interfere with tender fraud schemes – and will sometimes participate in them.³⁷ In the words of an investigative journalist, the boards of Johannesburg municipal entities are a classic case of 'foxes guarding the henhouse'.³⁸

The highly politicized nature of some boards means they often lack the requisite range of expertise relevant to the entities they supposedly supervise, heavily affecting the quality of service delivery governance and contravening section 93E(1)(a) of the Municipal Systems Act (2000, revised 2024) and Article 3.4.4 of the council's 2011 group policy on the shareholder governance of boards of directors (the 2020 iteration was inaccessible at the time of writing).³⁹ As was seen in the 2023 JPC case, 'a tollgate cashier, a receptionist and a person with a grade 11 [the second-last year of basic education in South Africa]' were appointed to the board.⁴⁰ According to one ward councillor, 'There's not a single engineer on the water board [Johannesburg Water], and City Power is no different.'⁴¹

How tender fraud works

As noted in a study of how patronage networks and tender corruption combine, 'every stage [of the tender] presents opportunities for interference by, say, leaking inside information to a certain bidder, manipulating the scores or disqualifying a bidder on a technicality'.⁴²

At the heart of tender fraud is the inflation of price and diminishment of costs, which creates a monetary surplus that can 'feed' the patronage network. In other words, the value of the tender must be increased beyond the work required, while the costs of undertaking the work must be minimized to create a larger margin.

There are many variations of how these schemes can function, but most depend to some degree on the insertion of intermediaries. Detailed conversations with a stakeholder with direct experience of the tender process revealed an illustrative 10-step process in which bids, bidders and subcontractors are manipulated, with the result that the work performed is poor, limited or non-existent (Figure 7).

There are many other schemes in tender fraud. Non-preferred bidders can be disqualified on spurious grounds according to the points-scoring system used by the council, while the tender process can be selective in how it evaluates and selects bids.⁴³ In addition to the formal tender system, a three-quote system applies to contracts above R2 000 and below R750 000 (an upper limit increased by the National Treasury from R200 000 in December 2023).⁴⁴ This was introduced with the intention of reducing the administrative burden for lower-risk procurement. The official argument was reportedly that lower-value contracts covered by the three-quote system are low risk, whereas contracts exceeding the minimum threshold are high risk. However, both are high risk.⁴⁵

Several interviewees confirmed that the three-quote system has become a mechanism for engineering predetermined outcomes. According to a journalist, 'all three [quoting entities] collude and the outcome is decided before anyone sees the paperwork'.⁴⁶ The formal tender process has been similarly undermined by excessive use of Regulation 36 of the Municipal Supply Chain Management Regulations under the Municipal Finance Management Act.⁴⁷ The regulation permits procurement to deviate from competitive bidding processes in exceptional circumstances. The AG's 2024/2025 report found that deviations were being used 'in instances where there was

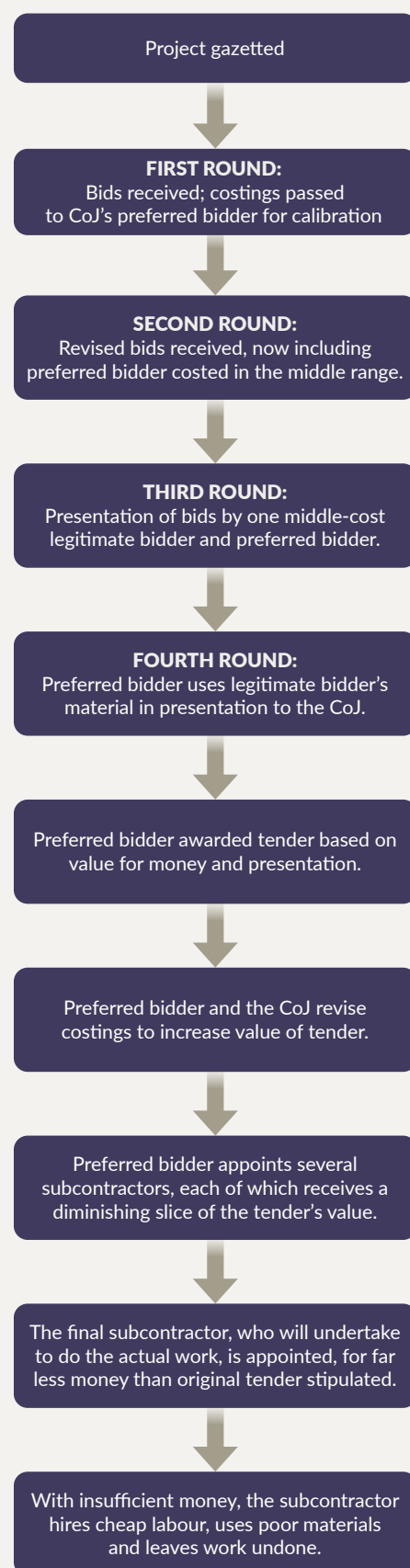


FIGURE 7 A tender fraud process.

no justifiable reason to deviate or where the deviation resulted from poor planning',⁴⁸ and identified R357 million in procurement deviations.⁴⁹

The use of unnecessary intermediaries as inflationary devices is also widespread. Perhaps the textbook case for this came with the Joburg Broadband Network Project, which aimed to establish a 940-kilometre fibre ring across the city. Ericsson won the bid to undertake the work, but the city also decided to appoint two consulting facilitating contractors: a black economic empowerment partner,⁵⁰ CitiConnect Communications (formed months before the project initially went to tender in 2008)⁵¹ that would handle quality inspections; and BWired (sign-offs and second-tier invoicing).

Ericsson won the bid due to its proven expertise, but not without officials requesting additional services such as sponsorship of a tennis school and completion of libraries in Soweto. The value of the contract was also increased by more than 30% after meetings with city officials, adding hundreds of millions of rand to the cost.⁵² BWired was given the power to vary the contract value submitted by Ericsson by an unlimited amount, opening the door to increased costs once work was under way.⁵³ Project management costs, for example, that had originally been quoted at R400 per hour could now be adjusted to R1 200. Two sources with direct knowledge claimed that BWired allegedly over-invoiced for contractor rates, by up to 70% in some cases,⁵⁴ and bribes were paid to contractors in exchange for signing off on work.⁵⁵

As a consequence of the consulting arrangements, the cost of the project rose from R780 million (a figure already inflated during the bid process) to R1.2 billion in 2014, at which point the CoJ terminated the contract and took control of the network, which was still not operational 18 months after the go-live date.⁵⁶ Two senior ANC politicians who had previously served as directors of CitiConnect Communications reportedly received substantial payouts from the sale of their shares after the city acquired the business.⁵⁷

Size of the tender pie

Although it is not possible to estimate how much money is directly lost to procurement fraud, the money the CoJ spends on tenders gives some indication of the size of the pie. Procurements are processed differently according to their value: the three-quote system covers contracts valued above R2 000 and less than R750 000, while tenders more than R750 000 must go through the full process. In many cases, tenders of more than R5 million undergo a probity process, with bids checked for compliance and reports reviewed by the relevant bid committees.⁵⁸

There is, however, no consolidated or comparable data for how much each municipal entity spends on procurement. Johannesburg Water is the most transparent, stating that it spent R2.31 billion in 2024/2025 (up from R2.14 billion the year before) on all forms of procurement.⁵⁹

But some indication of the overall value can be gleaned from National Treasury data on the municipality's 'contracted services'. While also covering expenditure not associated with the risks described here, it includes payments for electrical work, refuse removal, water tankers, non-payroll labour and security services.⁶⁰ As such, it can stand as a rough estimate of service procurement.

The value of such contracted services has risen steadily in recent years, peaking at R7.17 billion in 2023/2024. For corrupt and criminal actors, even a fraction of such sums represents a lucrative proposition, as can be seen by the fact that at least 10 of the council's 13 entities have histories of alleged serious tender fraud.⁶¹ ■

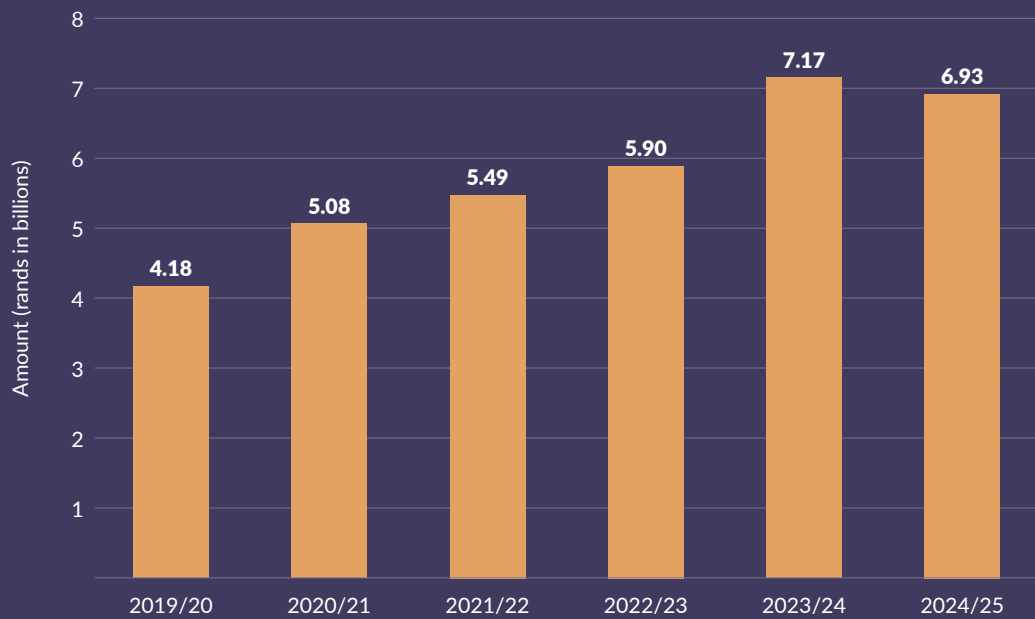


FIGURE 8 Value of the City of Johannesburg's contracted services (in billions of rand), 2019/20–2024/25.

SOURCE: National Treasury

The political reinvestment

The profile of tender recipients is a key part of the tender fraud game. In some cases, the relationships between those awarding tenders and those profiting from them may be simply transactional – ‘pay to play’ kickbacks – though the severity of even this simple form of corruption should not be underestimated. A 2019 investigation into the Johannesburg Road Agency (JRA) found that this kind of corruption had contributed to widespread deterioration of infrastructure.⁶² In other cases, tender fraud may be purely extractive: simple theft of funds conducted on a grand scale.

But alongside self-enrichment, politically directed tender fraud has much bigger ambitions, aiming to extract money from formal political budgets and reinvest it in informal political budgets that can be used for campaigning, maintaining patronage networks and securing close relationships with business. This is especially the case within the ANC, which is highly factionalized and in which positions of influence are decided at national conferences every five years, creating a requirement for significant resources for internal and external campaigning.⁶³ (According to one academic, ANC members ‘are more worried about the electoral conference than the general election’.⁶⁴) As a result, municipal tender fraud sometimes has provincial and even national political implications.

The money path

Several approaches are used to control the flow of money from municipal coffers to private bank accounts and political slush funds. The first method, which can be highly lucrative but is not in itself illegal, is a 'closed loop', in which tenders are awarded to politically connected companies, such as those run by relatives or friends of councillors or city employees.⁶⁵ The AG found six contracts awarded to such connections for the extension of Johannesburg's Rea Vaya bus rapid transit system in 2023/2024, totalling nearly R1 billion.⁶⁶

Politically connected contractors are used to channel funds to political parties. In 2024, a senior City Power executive authorized an upfront payment of R15 million to a company directed by the younger brother of an ANC benefactor for work it was a year late in completing.⁶⁷ In 2018, investigative journalism outfit amaBhungane exposed a scheme in which a R1.26 billion vehicle tender was awarded, without competition, to a company with the lowest score in the original round of bids six months earlier. According to journalists, the company then paid R500 000 to a company run by Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema's cousin, allegedly to be used as a 'slush fund' for Malema and the party.⁶⁸ (Both Malema and his cousin denied the accusation.⁶⁹)

Sometimes even the intermediary is dispensed with: in 2023, opposition party ActionSA reported at Hillbrow police station that the CoJ MMC for economic development, Nomoya Mnisi, had allegedly ordered the acting chief financial officer of the JPC to pay almost R900 000 for an ANC youth event; the official refused to make the payment and resigned in protest. (Mnisi denied any wrongdoing.⁷⁰) According to findings made by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (the Zondo Commission), the MMC for Finance, Geoff Makhubo, who was also ANC Treasurer for the Greater Johannesburg region, in 2016 asked for a R50 million donation to the ANC for election campaigning funds from a technology firm that had won major contracts with the city and was in the process of bidding for a contract renewal.⁷¹

The relationship grows more complicated when serious business interests are involved, because these interests also have their own agenda. This was shown by the Zondo Commission, which highlighted how the Guptas, a wealthy business family from India, actively and strategically sought to penetrate the state during the presidency of Jacob Zuma.⁷² Evidence suggests that CoJ tenders have become a target for such high-level actors, adding another layer to the tender fraud network. In 2019, for example, the then mayor of Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba, said he was investigating a contract signed between the JMPD and facilities management company African Global Holdings, formerly known as Bosasa, which was a major player in state capture under Zuma.⁷³

These examples illustrate that, at its most sophisticated, the money extracted by tender fraud is partly reinvested in local, provincial and national politics, providing politicians with campaign war chests and deeper party resources. At least one case of tender fraud may have had a significant impact on the direction of council politics (see box below). As such, tender fraud taints the democratic process.

Tender 'fraud' financing political gamesmanship?

The case of Proton House illustrates the possible connections between alleged tender fraud and political machinations. It contributed to a broader political struggle that ultimately resulted in the downfall of Johannesburg's multi-party coalition government.⁷⁴

On 2 September 2022, a R27 million payment was made by the JPC for rental arrears and the refurbishment of office spaced leased by the CoJ at Proton House. This amount far exceeded an earlier estimate of approximately R2 million.⁷⁵

After losing a no-confidence vote on 30 September, former Democratic Alliance (DA) mayor Mpho Phalatse laid criminal charges against the JPC, alleging that the Proton House payment had been used to 'destabilize' Johannesburg's coalition 'by funding the payment of bribes to councillors in order to entice them to vote against our government'.

Phalatse also alleged that the JPC had ignored the initial quote and appointed a new quantity surveyor who generated the higher estimate, and that the company that received the money had ties to the ANC, the leading party in the opposition bloc.⁷⁶ (The JPC rejected these claims and sued Phalatse for defamation.⁷⁷)

Helen Botes, the chief executive officer of the JPC, who authorized the payment, was placed on special leave. She vowed to defend herself.⁷⁸ The investigation into the Proton House affair, led by the GFIS, became entangled in political disputes and changes in city leadership. The process was repeatedly disrupted and ultimately culminated in the removal of the GFIS head and the reinstatement of Botes.⁷⁹ ■

MAIN EVENTS IN THE PROTON HOUSE CASE



A troubled transparency and accountability system

Eroding accountability and transparency is a critical objective for corrupt actors to enable them to operate without sanction. That said, in the CoJ it is often unclear to what extent issues surrounding financial reporting, access to information and failure to hold wrongdoers to account are the result of concerted insider efforts or broader bureaucratic failures.

Access to information is one of the most basic but critical tools for transparency and accountability, yet journalists say the council's inner workings are becoming increasingly opaque. One alleged that council sittings, which are supposed to be open to the public, are increasingly difficult to access, even for journalists, and that they are becoming more hostile, disorganized and undisciplined due to a culture of impunity among councillors.⁸⁶ For information that cannot be obtained internally, the Promotion of Access to Information Act provides a theoretical recourse. In practice, however, requests can take years. One journalist noted that a document request submitted under the act took three years to receive a response.⁸⁷

Financial reporting is also an area of concern. The same devolved structure that delegates governance also fragments reporting. To track the council's finances, one has to scrutinize 14 annual reports. Several interviewees said the blanket reporting of revenue across all entities in the form of consolidated financial statements and reports rendered the budget 'meaningless' as a transparency tool, because it cannot be disaggregated in a way that allows the public to assess how money moves between entities.⁸⁸ In the words of a civil society representative, 'The money doesn't make sense.'⁸⁹

Sweeping, the practice of transferring revenue collected by different municipal entities into central municipal accounts,⁹⁰ is technically not illegal and does not demonstrate that funds have been misappropriated, but the AG says it 'limits the ability of municipal entities to ring-fence and manage revenue generated from their own services' and centralizes control over funds.⁹¹ As one interviewee described it, 'The sweeping mechanism maximizes interest and doesn't return it. It creates a pot. That pot doesn't belong to service delivery; it belongs to whoever controls the account.'⁹²

This lack of financial transparency can also be seen in the R7.6 billion equitable share grant the council receives annually from the National Treasury. The grant includes a component calculated to provide free basic services to poor households, but it is nevertheless unconditional and may also support other municipal functions. In Johannesburg's case, however, it appears that the money being spent on helping poor households is far below what might be desired, with hundreds of thousands of families missing out on support. JoburgCAN, a civil society organization advocating for greater accountability and improved service delivery, estimated in 2024 that while Johannesburg's equitable share allocation could support free basic services for about 1.1 million households, only 140 000 benefited. 'The CoJ is deliberately keeping the indigent register numbers low to redirect that grant to the city's budget, as they have full discretion on how the grant is distributed,' argued JoburgCAN.⁹³ (According to the council, the 'discrepancy arises due to different definitions of indigent households' between the CoJ and the National Treasury.⁹⁴) The AG's report also identified unqualified beneficiaries on the list, including employed people, business owners and those whose spouses are employed.

The AG's annual reports regularly flag the quality of CoJ financial reporting as 'poor'.⁹⁵ In 2025, the AG said the city's budget was the biggest in South Africa and it 'should have no difficulty' ensuring it had the skills and the capability to deliver good financial statements.⁹⁶ Capacity, however, is a major issue. According to the AG, vacancies and a lack of financial management skills were the biggest contributing factors to financial units not delivering credible financial reports or implementing good preventative financial controls.⁹⁷ In 2023/2024, Johannesburg had an 8% vacancy rate in its municipal finance unit.⁹⁸ The City of Cape Town's vacancy rate was 1%.⁹⁹ However, political interference has also contributed to this skills shortage, due to cadre deployment and political interference in the recruitment process.¹⁰⁰

Performance across the council is also low, contributing to decline and mismanagement. Out of the CoJ's top 22 managers, seven missed their performance targets in 2023/2024.¹⁰¹ The council's 2025 audit report assessed that the city had failed to meet most of its performance targets in 2024/2025. In the two strategic areas submitted for auditing, only 40% of planned sustainable service delivery targets were achieved and only 36% of infrastructure development and refurbishment targets were met. In three other areas, the CoJ missed its targets by 100%.¹⁰² Mismanagement and a widespread lack of skills were serious contributing factors. A number of high-level managers were acting in their roles, managerial positions critical for service delivery were vacant, and the situation was similar at the operational level.¹⁰³ At Johannesburg Water, for example, there was a vacancy rate of 36% for professionally qualified workers and 43% for senior technicians, and at City Power the respective rates were 43.8% and 72%.¹⁰⁴

For the past decade, the AG has issued the same findings in its consolidated reports, routinely tying irregular expenditure by the council to unfunded budget approvals,¹⁰⁵ systemic weaknesses in supply chain management and failure to hold accounting officers liable. The AG's deputy business unit leader, Msizi Mavundla, has noted repeated weaknesses in consequence management and investigations into irregular expenditure. In general, the AG has recommended the same corrective action, yet there has been no meaningful follow-through. Its 2024/2025 report noted that audit findings have had limited impact, constrained by 'slow and incomplete implementation of recommendations due to insufficient management action'.¹⁰⁶ The AG's 2023/2024 report refers to 'shortcomings in the accountability ecosystem'.¹⁰⁷

Section 32 of the Municipal Finance Management Act stipulates that politicians or officials who permit irregular or unauthorized expenditure may be held personally liable.¹⁰⁸ The accounting officer – the

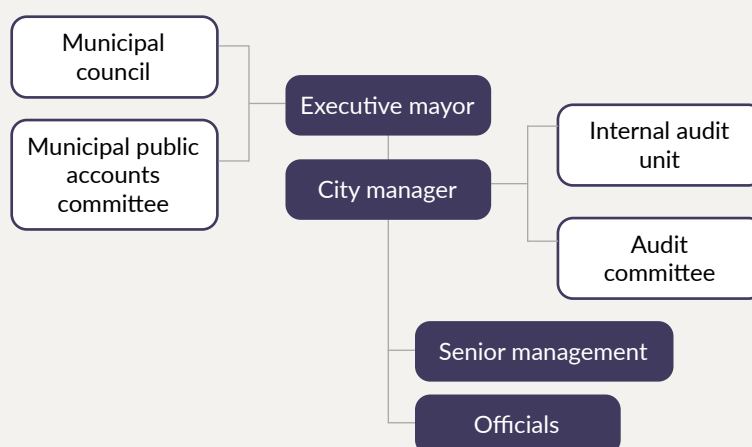


FIGURE 9 The City of Johannesburg accountability structure.

city manager in the CoJ's case – bears primary statutory responsibility for financial compliance under the act. Additionally, where a material irregularity has caused financial loss and corrective action has not been taken, the Public Audit Amendment Act of 2018 empowers the AG to hold the accounting officer personally liable for the loss. This debt is recoverable by the state.¹⁰⁹

In practice, however, the city manager position has been subject to the same instability as the mayoral office, hampering accountability.¹¹⁰ As one investigative journalist described it, the average tenure in the role is 12–18 months, yet most investigations take longer than that.¹¹¹ By the time accountability mechanisms produce a finding, the responsible official has typically already been transferred to another department or entity. As a result, this mechanism appears to have few teeth: the AG has issued only one certificate of debt across all municipalities in South Africa, over a water tanker tender in the North West province.¹¹²

This was corroborated by interviews with journalists, a civil society representative and an academic.¹¹³ They described a lack of appetite within the CoJ for officials to be held personally liable for irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, demonstrating a lack of accountability or the absence of political will to ensure accountability. They also described 'constant scapegoating' between the accounting officer and disciplinary boards.¹¹⁴

If the weaknesses described above demonstrate an accountability system that is ineffective and vulnerable to abuse, the chequered history of GFIS provides more direct evidence of political interference in an oversight body. Several interviewees cited this as a key factor in the council's lack of internal accountability.

GFIS was launched by then mayor Herman Mashaba in November 2016 to 'ensure that an effective fraud risk-management process is in place to provide operational effectiveness to the City's prevention, detection, investigation and response to the risks of fraud, corruption, theft of assets and maladministration'.¹¹⁵ It investigated more than 6 000 cases involving transactions worth R35 billion,¹¹⁶ but faced sustained political push-back and pressure from criminal groups.¹¹⁷ In June 2023, the council adopted a report declaring all previous corruption probes and forensic findings conducted by the GFIS to be 'unlawful, null and void', and handed the watchdog's powers to the city manager.¹¹⁸ Notably, Sinaye Nxumalo, the current acting head of GFIS, was the subject of a forensic investigation at the time of her appointment in 2023.¹¹⁹ (No publicly available information on the outcome of the investigation was available at the time of writing.)

In 2022, allegations by councillors that GFIS was spying on them – allegedly with the use of cellphone grabbers – led to a multimillion-rand internal investigation. The allegations were found to be baseless, GFIS was cleared by the State Security Agency¹²⁰ and the National Prosecuting Authority declined to prosecute.¹²¹ GFIS remains technically operational, but the 2024 assassination of a forensic investigator – believed to have been looking into corruption involving JMPD members – has had a chilling effect on internal reporting, according to interviewees.¹²² One said that the operating environment of GFIS investigators was characterized by 'fear, intimidation and threat to life'.¹²³

Allegations of compromised accountability extend beyond the council. In April 2026, it was alleged that two Hawks officers who had received whistle-blower evidence of tender fraud at City Power passed the information to the implicated executives and subsequently withheld the source's evidence from the case docket, hampering the prosecution.¹²⁴ One councillor also claimed that information he had given to the JMPD about a criminal in his ward was passed to the criminal, who confronted the councillor and said, 'Everyone's in my pocket, brother, and you can be [too] if you want'.¹²⁵

Ultimately, the weaknesses in Johannesburg's accountability system are a result of chronic administrative dysfunction that has at times been compounded by attempts to obstruct, intimidate or circumvent the council's oversight bodies. The political factor is hard to parse, but the systems in place are only as effective as those charged with directing them, some of whom may have ulterior motives beyond the formal execution of their duties.

Addressing irregular expenditure: a comparative study

According to interviewees, the lack of financial transparency in the CoJ makes it nearly impossible to pin down where irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure is a result of corruption as opposed to bad management.¹²⁶ To bring greater insight to the data, we used the City of Cape Town to highlight differences in how the accountability ecosystem reacts to irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure being flagged.

Johannesburg's irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure grew on a sustained linear path until 2017/2018, when the council started writing off large volumes of it. In June 2026, the CoJ said it had written off R45.16 billion over the past five years after investigations by its municipal public accounts committee (MPAC).¹²⁷ Write-offs (or 'condonations') are possible only when investigation, recovery or certification processes have demonstrated that the expenditure cannot be recovered, and are not necessarily indicators of corruption. But if condonations are not done, the council risks continuing to make payments on contracts flagged as irregular by the AG, which not only adds to irregular expenditure but displays a flagrant disregard for accountability.¹²⁸

The MPACs in Cape Town and Johannesburg are tasked with investigating instances of irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure and make recommendations to the council about recovering money or writing off expenses as irrecoverable, and whether disciplinary proceedings are required or if the case should be referred to the South African Police Services (SAPS).¹²⁹ These irregularities are not always the result of criminality; they could be related to projects stalling, payment disputes, cost overruns, questions raised about bidding processes, or lawful deviations from normal procurement practices.¹³⁰ However, this can be established only by MPAC investigations, and the AG's 2023/2024 report said that Johannesburg had not

investigated irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure in three years.¹³¹

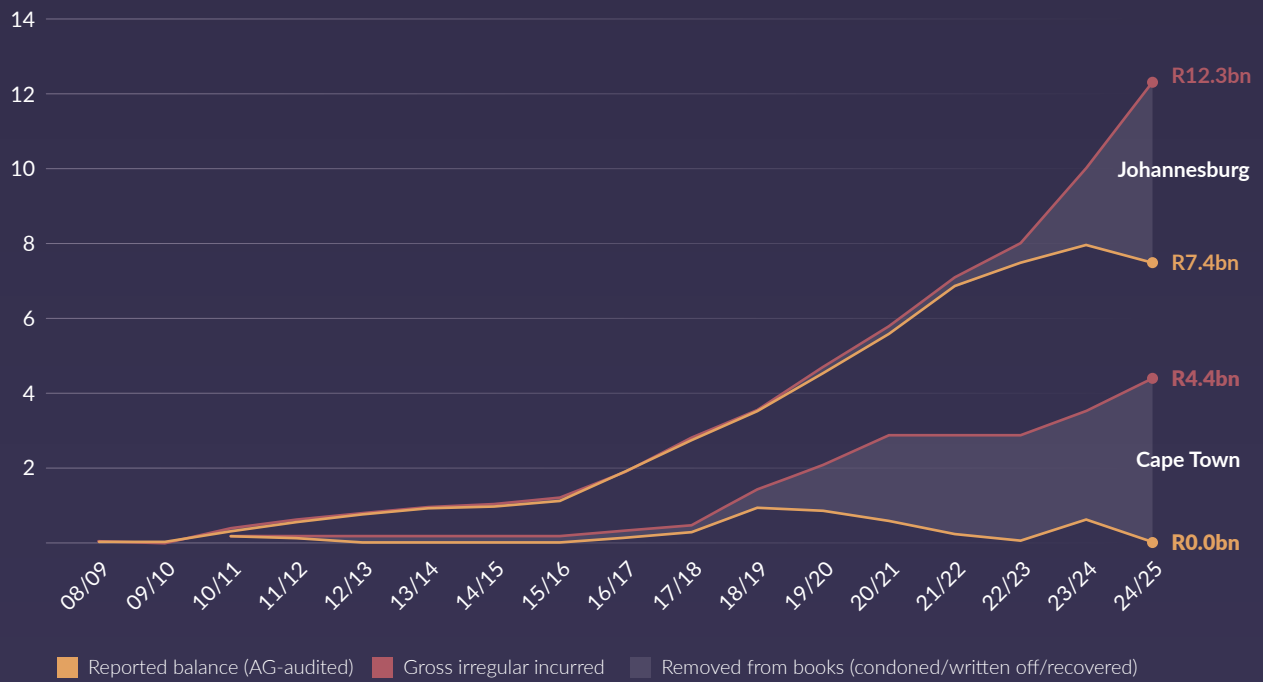
In Cape Town, condonation is a regular and ongoing process, as a result of which the city's balance is almost zero. A well-run accountability ecosystem also means that fruitless, wasteful and unauthorized expenditure almost never occur, as explained by a City of Cape Town MPAC member:

All irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure gets broken down into specific cases, and each and every case gets referred to MPAC for investigation. We do the full investigation and whatever the findings are, we recommend that to council, and then council will either support or reject those recommendations, and then that goes back to the city manager, then finds its way back to internal audit and then to the Auditor-General. The Auditor-General will again check all of those things to see if we have dealt with it correctly. Everything that is in the annual report goes to internal audit, internal audit gives a plan in terms of how they are going to address these matters, and then in the next round the Auditor-General will follow up on all those matters.

The MPAC will recommend criminal investigation, disciplinary steps and recovery of irregular or fruitless and wasteful expenditure where money was lost due to wrongdoing or negligence.¹³²

Seen from this perspective, Cape Town's regular condonations are an indication that the gears in the city's accountability ecosystem are turning. Johannesburg's failure to investigate its irregular, unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure cases with the same rigour illustrates the extent to which its accountability ecosystem is failing to keep pace. ■

Irregular expenditure (R billion)



Unauthorized expenditure (R billion)

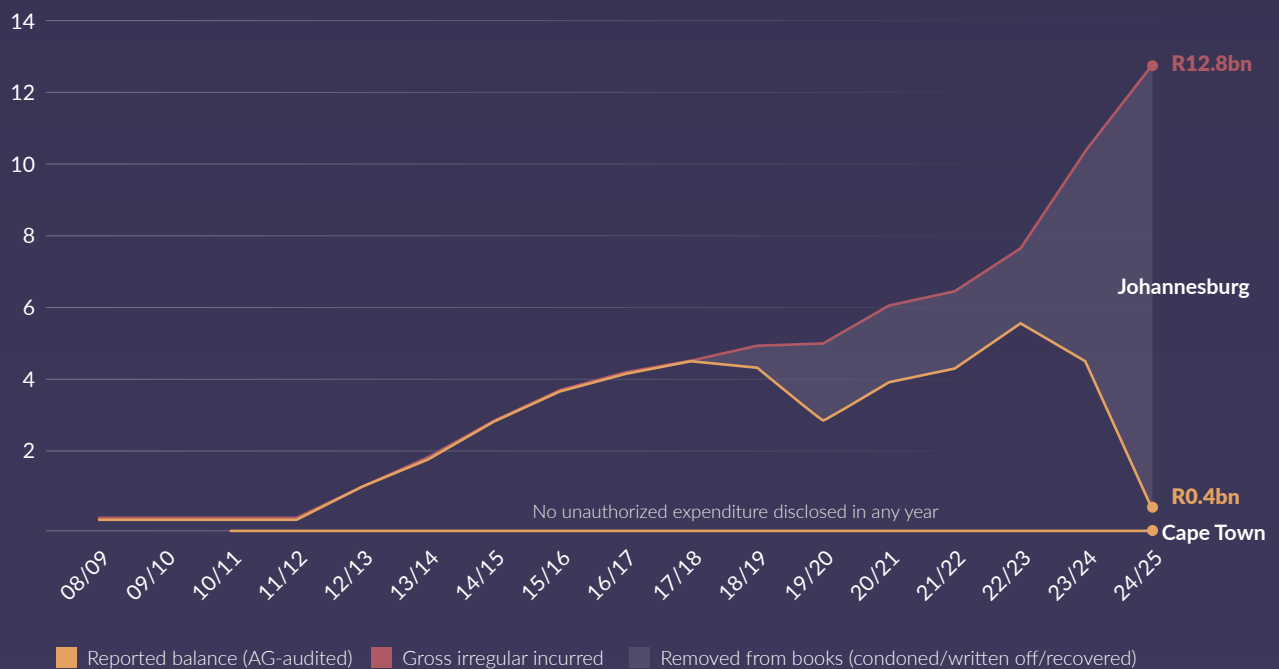


FIGURE 10 Irregular and unauthorized expenditure in Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2011/12-2024/25.

Track two: Hybrid collusion

Collusion is an entrenched feature of the relationship between elements in the CoJ and organized crime actors, who are often partners in crime. While similar in form to the state capture phenomenon in relation to municipal entities, it differs in that these relationships are generally shaped and driven by outright criminality at some point in the value chain, be it sabotage, hijacking buildings, copper theft or violence.

Insider trading: hijacked buildings

Johannesburg is notorious for its hijacked buildings. As of 2026, the city centre alone had at least 188 hijacked properties, and estimates put the number as high as 300 if derelict and partly hijacked properties are included.¹³³ The phenomenon is expanding beyond the traditionally 'blighted' areas of Hillbrow and the CBD into affluent suburbs such as Bryanston and Upper Houghton.¹³⁴ In City Deep and Rosettenville, industrial warehouses and commercial storefronts have been seized for housing, 'shadow shops' (operating without the necessary permits or valid leases), and to store illicit goods.¹³⁵ Land is also hijacked by criminals who then construct shacks and rent them out.¹³⁶ This expansion signifies a maturing criminal enterprise that exploits legal disputes, administrative decay and the desperate need for urban housing.¹³⁷

The hijacking of buildings can be a purely criminal affair or it can involve criminal collusion with municipal officials.¹³⁸ In the latter case, these groups identify vulnerable properties – typically those owned by deceased estates or people living abroad, or those with significant municipal arrears that are ripe for 'bad building' designation – and hijack them. Revenues from such enterprises can be significant: a mansion in Bryanston, for instance, was reported to generate R164 000 in monthly 'rent' for its hijackers while accumulating municipal debt of more than R1 million.¹³⁹ In larger CBD buildings, the revenue scales into the millions, funding further criminal activities such as drug trafficking and human smuggling.

In practical terms, the most significant barrier to shutting down a hijacked building is often the legal requirement in some cases for the municipality to provide temporary emergency accommodation to its residents before an eviction can be executed.¹⁴⁰ And it is not the hijackers who bear the pain of such processes but the buildings' residents, who are often poor, vulnerable and unable to mount legal challenges (although there have been notable exceptions). Because the council has an acute shortage of temporary emergency accommodation and no budget to build more, courts frequently suspend evictions.



Some of Johannesburg's largest hijacked buildings generate millions in illicit revenue, fuelling wider criminal enterprises such as drug trafficking and human smuggling. *Photo supplied*

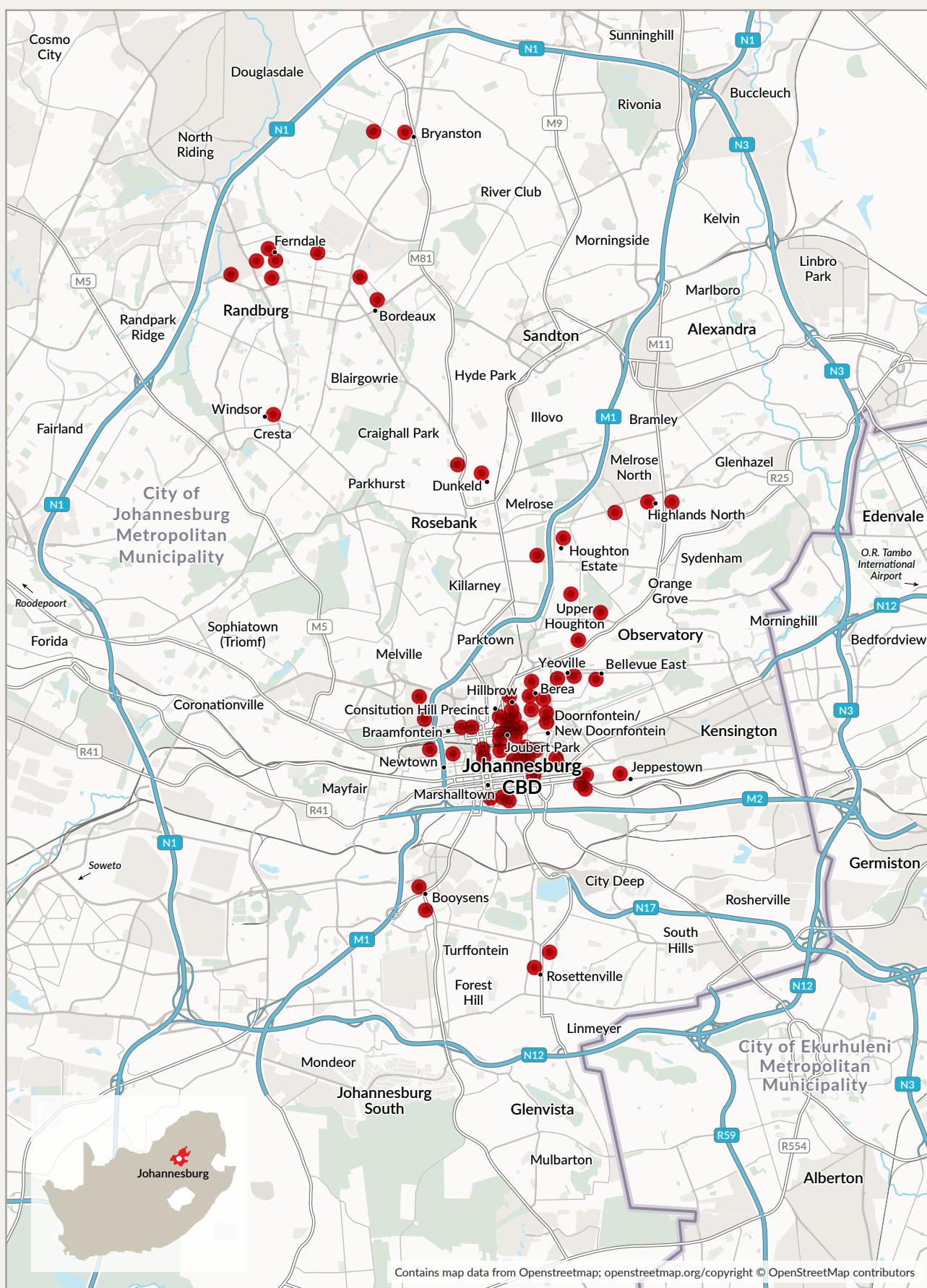


FIGURE 11 Areas containing hijacked and recovered buildings in Johannesburg, based on media reports of confirmed hijackings and recoveries.

A landmark high court judgment in April 2025 ordered the CoJ to pay R12 million to a private property owner because the council's failure to provide temporary emergency accommodation had prevented the owner from evicting hijackers for years.¹⁴¹ Reclaiming hijacked buildings has been slow work: 44 were reclaimed by the council between 2016 and 2019, and 15 between 2025 and 2026. Several of the most notorious buildings in the city centre – such as Vannin Court in Hillbrow, which has been hijacked for 20 years – remain in the grip of criminal syndicates, despite intermittent vows of political action.¹⁴² Corruption has also been cited as a reason why words seldom lead to action.¹⁴³

In one alleged model of hijacking described in media reporting and interviews with people familiar with the process, criminal syndicates work with corrupt council employees to research a building's registered owner, zoning and pending court cases, such as those involving unpaid utility bills, property rates or renovation costs (often the building is legally attached until the matter is resolved).¹⁴⁴ According to a former municipal worker, 'They [the syndicate] know exactly which properties are weak. If rates haven't been paid for months, if there's a deceased estate not finalized or if the owner is overseas, those properties are flagged. It's not guesswork. It's data collected through an authentic process.'¹⁴⁵

Once a building has been identified, the locks are changed, security personnel are placed at the entrances, and a new 'landlord' sets out new arrangements for rent, utilities and maintenance. The rent is set lower than before, to retain the tenants and attract new ones, and is collected in cash. If the building's electricity and/or water have been cut off, the hijackers may illegally reconnect the building by bribing utility workers. Sometimes, tenants are asked to contribute to the bribe.¹⁴⁶ Hijackers may also engineer periods of service blackout when demanding higher rents. Municipal officials who work with the syndicate will 'inspect the building' from time to time to ensure tenants are keeping to the new agreement with the hijacker. In a final stage, corrupt officials may facilitate the fraudulent transfer of ownership of the property to the hijackers.¹⁴⁷

The Joburg Property Company

Managing approximately 29 000 properties, the JPC is one of the council's major entities.¹⁴⁸ It has long faced allegations of poor governance, corruption and negligence, from the awarding of COVID-19 sanitation contracts to unqualified firms to the channelling of advertising revenue of up to R70 million a month to a law firm instead of the council's account.¹⁴⁹

The JPC was also taken to task for the 2023 fire at 80 Albert Street, a hijacked building it owned, that killed at least 76

people. An inquiry found that the 'City of Johannesburg and its entities, including JPC, must bear the responsibility, in part, for what ultimately became the tragedy of the 31 August 2023 fire'.¹⁵⁰

In June 2026, a long-running case involving the illegal transfer and sale of 33 council buildings dating back to 2010 came to a head with the arrest of several people, including a former JPC employee and a former lawyer.¹⁵¹ ■

A similar scheme applies to land. Criminals work with municipal officials to determine who owns a piece of land, and if conditions are amenable they create an informal settlement. While the monthly rent may be modest – R500 per shack – high density means returns for a single settlement can total R60 000 a month.¹⁵² According to a ward councillor, criminal syndicates with several settlements can earn about R200 000 a month, enough to employ lawyers in the event of legal challenges over the use of the land.¹⁵³ The number of such settlements has grown from 181 in 2016 to more than 300 in 2026.¹⁵⁴

As highlighted by a former security guard at a hijacked building, in these schemes there is often no distinction between council official and criminal: both work together as part of a syndicate: ‘There was my cousin [who worked in the government], two other guys I did not know and an uncle who worked in the council ... one guy in the meeting had all the information on the target buildings, which came from the councillor and utilities people. Another guy was in charge of getting the *induna* [chief administrator for the hijackers] of the buildings and one was responsible for acting as the new owner; myself and the Nigerian guy were security.’¹⁵⁵

Later, the guard took over security for several buildings, work that brought him into even more direct contact with the council: ‘Now I was working more closely with council guys and some JMPD and police. ... I must say these guys was *honger* [hungry] as they always just *foja* [looked for] money even before any *span* [work] was *khuluma* [spoken].’¹⁵⁶

The industry is highly violent in protecting its interests, as was seen in the murder of DJ Warras in December 2025 (see box below).

Assassination of DJ Warras

The hijacking industry readily uses violence to protect its interests, as illustrated by the murder on 16 December 2025 of Warrick Stock, a 40-year-old media personality professionally known as DJ Warras.

Stock had just conducted an inspection of Zambezi House on Commissioner Street in the CBD, a building he was helping manage and secure through his company, JT VIP Security, on behalf of its legal owners, when he was shot five times.¹⁵⁷ Nothing was stolen from Stock, indicating that the attack was a premeditated hit.¹⁵⁸

According to media reports, the murder was a contract killing valued at R25 000, which was split among the participants.¹⁵⁹ A 44-year-old Soweto taxi boss, Victor Majola, was arrested six days later and charged with premeditated murder and conspiracy to commit murder.¹⁶⁰ Cellphone records showed Stock’s personal information, including his

home address and vehicle registration papers, had allegedly been sent to Majola by his girlfriend, a tenant involved in the Zambezi House dispute.¹⁶¹ A 25-year-old Mozambican national who was allegedly paid R7 000 to carry out the shooting was arrested on 30 January 2026.¹⁶²

Rental income at Zambezi House had reportedly dropped from R700 000 a month to R400 000 as hijackers diverted funds. Stock was installing biometric access control and CCTV to disrupt this illegal predation of the building’s income stream.¹⁶³ Before his death, he had obtained five protection orders against people associated with the building who had threatened him. Investigators believe the assassins may have targeted Stock under the mistaken belief that he was the sole owner of the building. By ‘eliminating the owner’, syndicates aim to paralyze eviction efforts and maintain illicit control.¹⁶⁴

Links with organized crime

Connections between the tender-centred criminal ecosystem and the city's broader organized crime networks are among the most complex aspects of this phenomenon. In some cases, such as the provision of violence, the links are relatively clear. But the deeper association remains a matter of allegation and rumour. In 2022, for example, two Fast Guns gangsters related how two prominent municipal politicians had visited them in Westbury and delivered drugs for the gang to sell – a tactic they said was common to most political parties: 'You see, when they run out of money, this is where they come, all of them, whether ANC, EFF, UDM [United Democratic Movement] ... all the so-called black and coloured parties come here to clean money or get rid of their drugs.'¹⁶⁵ No substantive evidence was found to support this claim, but there are other indications of intersections between the two ecosystems, including, as this report was going to press, allegations concerning the JMPD (see below).

In 2025, Patriotic Alliance leader Gayton McKenzie suspended the party's deputy president, Kenny Kunene, also the MMC for transport, for a month, pending an internal investigation of his alleged links to organized crime.¹⁶⁶ Sentenced to six years' imprisonment for fraud in 1997, Kunene reinvented himself as a businessman and nightclub owner before politics called and he was appointed to the mayoral committee in 2023. In July 2025, he was on the premises when Katiso Molefe was arrested for the 2022 murder of Oupa Sefoka (also known as DJ Sumbody, and a man linked to the cocaine economy).¹⁶⁷ Kunene denies having met Molefe before the arrest and claims to have been at the location to arrange an interview.¹⁶⁸ He was cleared by a legal report commissioned by the Patriotic Alliance in September.¹⁶⁹ Molefe, who was named at the Madlanga Commission as a leader of the Big Five alleged criminal syndicate, was also arrested over the mistaken-identity murder of engineer Armand Swart, which was intended to remove a whistle-blower who had exposed tender fraud (this case also involved a JMPD officer; see below).¹⁷⁰

For now, such stories are the exception, and while they do not prove links between the council and organized crime, they suggest that the two circles overlap. If the CoJ is still relatively inoculated from the penetrating tentacles of organized crime, so much the better, but this is one of the core issues to monitor. If the two ecosystems begin to merge, the consequences for Johannesburg will be severe.

A gang tag in Westbury, Johannesburg. Some sources allege that gangs are used by local politicians for money laundering and drug distribution, although no evidence was produced to substantiate these claims. *Photo supplied*



Cape Town provides a salutary example of the prospect of organized crime figures directly engaging with a municipality, though not to the extent that organized crime has become a governance stakeholder. Gangsters in Cape Town have generally been associated with construction mafias that extort licit contractors, and have established their own contractors to take on government projects. Companies linked to an alleged 28s gang boss, Ralph Stanfield, and his family members have registered on the Western Cape contractors' panel, allowing them to bid for work at city and provincial levels.¹⁷¹ At times, these practices have combined: in 2017, a contractor abandoned a project in Valhalla Park, an area controlled by the 28s, due to extortion threats. Glomix House Brokers, a company linked to Stanfield's wife, later took over part of the contract.¹⁷²

Other companies associated with the Stanfields have also reportedly bid for government tenders, sometimes with the assistance of insiders. Malusi Boozi, Cape Town's former MMC for human settlements, was accused alongside Stanfield of manipulating tenders in the housing sector totalling R1 billion to benefit companies under their influence.¹⁷³ Criminal charges arising from this were withdrawn in May 2025, but it was not an exoneration: after receiving new evidence, prosecutors had decided to withdraw the case and reinstate it later, rather than ask for a postponement. Fresh charges had not been laid at the time of writing.

Violence for hire

Across South Africa, violence is frequently used by and against politicians and other actors to remove whistleblowers or rivals for lucrative tenders, among other ends.¹⁷⁴ The Political Killings Task Team, a multi-disciplinary SAPS unit formed to investigate politically motivated murders, reported 39 instances of councillors, 'tenderpreneurs' (people who use political connections, influence or inside information to secure state procurement contracts, often bypassing fair legal processes through corruption or nepotism) and senior municipality officials ordering hits in the KwaZulu-Natal province alone between 2018 and 2025, with 59 councillors and 25 municipal officials killed.¹⁷⁵

At least five Johannesburg councillors were murdered between 2016 and 2026, with two more attempted assassinations, though motives are undetermined in many cases. In 2025, a DA councillor resigned after receiving death threats from a construction mafia seeking to insert itself in housing projects in her ward.¹⁷⁶ 'Wherever there are projects you

have got the biggest risk of a councillor being murdered,' she said.¹⁷⁷

Johannesburg's hit economy provides a pool of actors willing to undertake such work. The minibus taxi industry has long used violence as a means of arbitrating disputes, with taxi firms creating 'security' wings. Hitmen, or *izinkabi*, can be hired from such firms for other work.¹⁷⁸ Construction mafias have also been cited as hiring hitmen to target executives who failed to grant them tenders.¹⁷⁹ (This was one plausible motive for the 2024 murders of a Rand Water executive and his bodyguard and the wounding of the CoJ chief whip. One of the three men charged with the murders is a taxi owner.¹⁸⁰) External hitmen are also brought in from KwaZulu-Natal, an assassination hotbed, for work in Johannesburg.¹⁸¹ High-level political targets cost more than others – about R150 000, according to a Johannesburg hitman¹⁸² – yet the price is well within the reach of serious actors involved in tender fraud. ■

Profiting from thirst

Criminal syndicates often referred to as ‘water mafias’ are exploiting South Africa’s water crisis, recognizing that damaged infrastructure creates demand for alternative supply systems.¹⁸³ As a former water executive put it, ‘Every broken pipe becomes a potential contract. Every dry reservoir becomes a business opportunity. Every delayed infrastructure project creates demand for emergency procurement.’¹⁸⁴

In most cases, water mafias can simply take advantage of Johannesburg’s crumbling infrastructure to secure contracts; in others, however, there have been allegations that service-delivery failures are engineered and artificially sustained. In such cases, water mafias may secure their interests by vandalizing infrastructure to prolong the need for tankers; illegally sell municipal water; deliberately fail to deliver their contracted water; intimidate officials and rival water vendors; and engage in bribery to secure contracts.¹⁸⁵ As with hijacked buildings, the constitution of these syndicates often spans the legal and illegal realms, including contractors, politically connected individuals, corrupt officials and criminal actors.¹⁸⁶

Interviewees described a range of alleged methods through which actors seeking tanker business may aggravate or prolong shortages to create demand for their services. Reported techniques included damaging valves and temporary repairs, intimidating repair teams, colluding with utility employees to interrupt supply to an area, and tampering with treatment or testing processes. Although it was not possible to source corroborating evidence for such claims in Johannesburg, similar practices have been reported in analyses of the phenomenon in other regions and on a national scale.¹⁸⁷

Once a water shortage comes into being, pressure to fix it mounts instantly from affected communities, hospitals, clinics, schools and businesses. Residents may burn tyres and block main roads, as has been seen in the Johannesburg informal settlement of Phumla Mqashi, which has faced chronic water shortages since 2025.¹⁸⁸ ‘While this happened, the syndicate watched, fully knowing they would get tenders to supply water in the affected communities,’ a ward councillor reflected.¹⁸⁹ As one private investigator said, ‘Water is different from many other municipal services. People can survive without electricity for a period. Businesses can close temporarily. But communities cannot survive without water. This gives tanker suppliers extraordinary leverage during crises.’¹⁹⁰

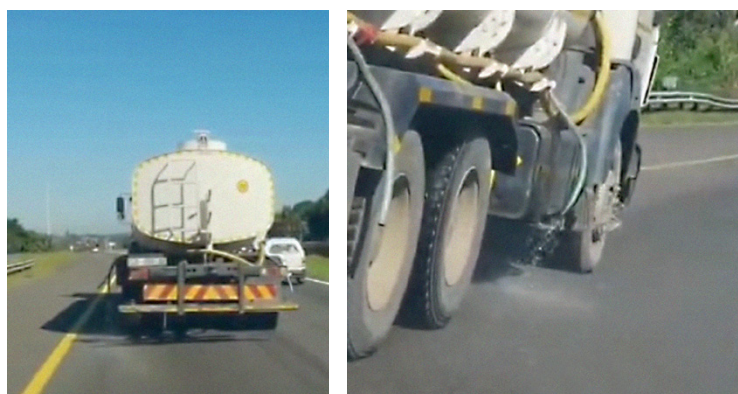


A Westbury resident fills containers from a water tanker. So-called water mafias are alleged to exploit, and in some cases deliberately create, water outages for financial gain. *Photo supplied*

Once the opportunity has arisen, water mafias will attempt to fill the service delivery gap by providing water tankers. They may do this informally or through a tender process. In the informal version, a syndicate may procure water from fire hydrants or an informal settlement elsewhere, then sell it in the area that has been cut off. In the more formal route, water mafias may seek early tender information from corrupt government officials, bribe water utility officials, intimidate or buy rival bidders, and use front companies.¹⁹¹ In some cases, councillors or government officials already have a tender that can be sold to the tanker syndicate, own tankers or have relatives or associates that do.

Tenders are frequently expedited because authorities argue that water delivery cannot wait for lengthy procedures. This form of emergency procurement is legitimate in principle but oversight mechanisms may come under pressure when tendering is done at speed.¹⁹² In December 2025, the high court set aside a R263 million three-year contract for tanker water that had been awarded to two companies headed by men in their 20s whose companies had previously shared an address.¹⁹³ The tender process appeared irregular, extending for more than a year with other bidders not informed of the outcome; and the tender had lapsed by the time the award was made.¹⁹⁴ (Leave to appeal was later granted, enabling the tender to continue pending the outcome.¹⁹⁵) Sometimes, companies that win tenders do not have enough vehicles to fulfil them, so they hire vehicles from other operators while retaining the municipal contract, increasing costs and creating layers of beneficiaries.¹⁹⁶

According to a Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) official, once water mafias secure a tender, it is in their interests to prolong the crisis.¹⁹⁷ They may, for instance, provide only a limited number of tankers that supply water to not more than 60% of an affected area, driving the need for more tankers. Tanker drivers often participate by selling water instead of delivering it or dumping supply en route, to create shortages for customers. One driver recalled how he was told to lose water by opening valves soon after he had filled his tanker.¹⁹⁸



A tanker dumping water en route to customers, Johannesburg, June 2026.
The practice has been linked to allegations of artificially induced water shortages. *Photo supplied*

If rival tanker firms attempt to take some of the business, water mafias may attempt to pay them to stop servicing the area, intimidate their operators, sabotage their tankers, or mobilize community members to spread rumours that they are distributing contaminated water.

The upshot is that some water mafias may be able to convert what are meant to be short-term emergency tenders into long-term contracts. And the money involved is substantial. Across the country, billions of rand have been lost to water fraud, according to the Special Investigating Unit (SIU), which in 2025 teamed up with the DWS to establish the Water Sector Anti-Corruption Forum.¹⁹⁹ The CoJ has spent R650 million on water tanker contracts in the past five years.²⁰⁰ At the South African Human Rights Commission's investigative inquiry into the Gauteng water crisis in May 2026 – convened after mass water outages²⁰¹ – officials admitted spending R130 million a year on tankers, 90% of which serviced informal settlements.²⁰²

Although the council plans to introduce its own fleet to reduce and ultimately remove the need to use the 60 tankers in operation, this will take time and may lead to further tension.²⁰³ According to a private investigator, murders linked to water tanker corruption and tender battles have created an atmosphere of intimidation among municipal employees, who are reluctant to speak openly because of fears for their safety.²⁰⁴

City Power: theft, collusion and procurement risk

Copper theft is a serious issue affecting service delivery in Johannesburg, with 652 incidents of cable theft and vandalism recorded between July 2025 and January 2026.²⁰⁵ According to a private investigator working in the sector, copper theft is a crime of wide-ranging sophistication, 'from minor incidents of copper being stolen by drug addicts to get a few rand for their next fix, to sophisticated syndicates with trucks, cranes, diggers and cutting torches removing underground cables worth millions of rand'.²⁰⁶



Illegal electricity connections, Johannesburg, June 2026. Photo supplied

Much copper theft is opportunistic and carried out by individuals or small groups. However, interviewees said the ecosystem around copper theft is well developed and in some cases shows high levels of organization and signs of collusion. 'It is not just opportunistic theft by individuals stripping cables. There are organized groups that work in layers: thieves on the ground, corrupt insiders who know where the weak spots are, transporters, complicit scrapyards, and buyers who move the metal into formal recycling streams or even exports,' said one expert.²⁰⁷

City Power has taken disciplinary action against electricians, security officers, team leaders and senior managers, several of whom were linked to fraud, collusion with contractors and theft.²⁰⁸ Contractors and security guards have also been arrested for stealing electricity infrastructure and materials.²⁰⁹ While most such cases are probably relatively straightforward theft and embezzlement schemes, according to a private investigator, the orchestration of copper theft may sometimes involve high-level actors, including political figures and top managers – the same people 'who sit in high-profile meetings to plan strategies to fight crime' – who place families, friends and confidants in companies that buy stolen copper.²¹⁰

It was not possible to find proven cases of 'sabotage-for-tender' schemes in Johannesburg, but several allegations were heard. A ward councillor alleged that some sabotage may be undertaken with an eye on securing more work from City Power.²¹¹ A journalist described a similar operating model in which the police (under the direction of political figures) instruct security guards to allow thieves to steal a transformer box. This gives rise to a tender to replace it, benefiting those who organized the theft. In a final flourish, the thieves are arrested to prove that those in charge have 'solved' the case.²¹² City Power also raised a suspicion that the destruction of new streetlights in October 2025 may have been perpetrated by those 'who may stand to benefit financially from such disruptions, including unscrupulous contractors'.²¹³

There is, however, evidence elsewhere in South Africa that shows how deliberate damage can manufacture maintenance work. In 2026, for example, an employee of Eskom, South Africa's state-owned electricity utility, was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for theft and tampering with essential

infrastructure at Camden Power Station in the Mpumalanga province.²¹⁴ The culprit confessed that his motive had been to secure additional maintenance and repair work.²¹⁵ An independent investigation at Tutuka Power Station in the same region identified a similar scheme, in which a 'manager allegedly orchestrated sabotage at the plant so that companies close to him would get contracts from Eskom'.²¹⁶ In a variation of the scheme in Johannesburg, copper theft was undertaken to extract money from residents, several of whom were approached by contractors to pay for the restoration of power after cables had been deliberately cut or components removed from locked electricity boxes.²¹⁷

As with the water mafias, violence and intimidation are used to protect the interests of those involved in copper theft. According to a private investigator, police and private investigators have been threatened with death, and their families have been targeted to stop investigations into companies buying, selling and transporting stolen copper to the country's ports.²¹⁸

The Metro Police: an emerging picture

Several interviewees remarked on the links between the JMPD and organized crime. According to a councillor, 'There is no criminal who does not know a metro police officer.'²¹⁹ A journalist who had extensively researched *zama zamas* alleged that JMPD officers were involved in supplying weapons to illegal mining syndicates and helping arrange the movement of mined gold-bearing material for processing.²²⁰

Such claims are difficult to substantiate,²²¹ but recent evidence points to high-level collusion between the department and organized crime. As this report was going to press, the Madlanga Commission heard allegations that JMPD officers had colluded with criminal syndicates, interfered with cocaine seizures to facilitate theft, and undertaken a R14.9 million gemstone robbery in partnership with criminals. The head of the Tactical Response Unit also allegedly designated certain areas 'no-go' zones for policing and arranged for an official escort for trucks carrying stolen copper, in exchange for a cut of the proceeds. Other cases also suggest systemic links.²²² In 2024, for example, media reporting alleged that JMPD officials were part of a 'guns-for-hire' syndicate that provided agency weapons and ammunition for cash-in-transit heists.²²³ The guns were reportedly booked out at weekends and placed in a safe that criminals could access. Once the criminals had used the weapons, they would return them to the safe with 'rental money'.

According to *City Press*, Zenzele Sithole, a senior GFIS investigator and a former Hawks detective, was leading an investigation into this syndicate when he was killed in a professional drive-by shooting in the Johannesburg CBD on 11 July 2024. Described as a dedicated 'corruption-buster' who spent his career unpicking complex criminal networks, he was reportedly about to expose the syndicate. The CoJ has denied that Sithole was investigating such a syndicate,²²⁴ and there has been no publicly confirmed arrest, report or charge concerning either the syndicate or Sithole's murder. That said, there has been at least one case of metro police officers being arrested for allegedly selling ammunition.²²⁵

A JMPD officer has also been cited at the Madlanga Commission,²²⁶ where the existence and operation of the Big Five cartel, allegedly led by businessman and tenderpreneur Vusimuzi 'Cat' Matlala, has been a key focus. Matlala and his associates are said to have captured key police units, including the JMPD.²²⁷ In March 2026, the JMPD confirmed its intention to charge one of its officers, Johannes Makgatle, for aiding another alleged member of the Big Five, Katiso Molefe. In October 2025, Makgatle was suspended pending an internal investigation after allegations emerged that he had misappropriated a council vehicle without permission in order to assist Molefe.²²⁸

Molefe was arrested on 6 December 2024 in connection with the murder of Armand Swart, an engineer at Q Tech who was killed in Vereeniging in April 2024 after the company made claims of corruption in the awarding of contracts for Transnet, South Africa's largest state-owned freight and logistics company.²²⁹ On the day of Molefe's arrest, it is alleged that Makgatle falsely claimed he was sick and unable to work, but he was at Molefe's house during the police operation and confronted the investigators in an alleged attempt to disrupt the arrest.²³⁰ JMPD's investigation found that Makgatle had used a departmental vehicle without authorization while off duty and referred that breach for internal prosecution.

Construction mafias: the council as victim – and sometimes partner

Construction mafias, sometimes called business forums, extort the council but are also said to collude with its officials. One forum member even became a councillor, receiving 'facilitation fees' from construction sites in both guises.

In numerous cases, council contractors have been targeted by business forums demanding up to 30% of the contract value and threatening to shut down building sites.²³¹ In 2021, for example, alleged former Majimbos gang member Farouk Meyer, who represented the Sisonke Eldorado Park Business Forum (and who was later killed in a hit), was accused of extorting money from a substation project and the reconstruction of a primary school.²³² Contractors who were not part of the forum were barred from the school site, bringing work to a halt. Meyer was reportedly an influential figure at local government meetings, one of which resulted in an increase in the value of the contracts. In such cases, council development projects become cash cows for organized crime, which extracts maximum value and leaves contractors insolvent and work abandoned.²³³ Varying degrees of violence are used.²³⁴

More troubling is when business forums have links to the council, merging extortion and collusion, and highlighting the overlaps between tracks 2 and 3 in this analysis. This claim was made, albeit with a political cast, by then DA mayor Herman Mashaba, who in 2019 accused the ANC of being aligned with business forums that were stalling projects across Johannesburg.²³⁵ According to Mashaba, these forums had been the beneficiaries of city contracts in the past: 'I am certain that this was just a part of the extensive political patronage network that characterized the previous administrations in Johannesburg.'²³⁶

Several sources, from residents of affected communities to political representatives, have claimed there are agreements between city employees and business forums.²³⁷ A 2023 report by the South African Cities Network heard from Johannesburg Development Agency respondents about ward councillors having 'covert connections' with certain business forums, though forums were also seen as mobilizing 'when the community has grievances around councillors manipulating the appointment process' (councillors have influence over the selection of local contractors).²³⁸

In a notable case, the two roles reportedly merged. In 2019, business forum leader turned city councillor Sithembiso Zungu allegedly demanded 'facilitation fees' from a developer to ensure the construction of 70 houses would proceed without hindrance, receiving more than R186 000 over 11 months, including R71 000 when he was an ANC councillor.²³⁹ Zungu subsequently broke an order barring him from the construction site and was sentenced to two months in prison.²⁴⁰ In August 2025, the Hawks said that a docket outlining a corruption case against Zungu, now the MMC for group corporate and shared services, had been taken to prosecutors.²⁴¹ At least one other councillor has also been accused of construction extortion, though no charges were brought.²⁴²

Again, Johannesburg is not unique in seeing political connections with business forums.²⁴³ There is, for example, a corruption case against former eThekweni mayor Zandile Gumede, who is accused of running a patronage network that included business forums (she denies the charges and has pleaded not guilty).²⁴⁴ There are national estimates of the cost of such practices, including through the Infrastructure Built Anti-Corruption Forum, a multi-stakeholder initiative launched in May 2021 by the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure and the SIU.²⁴⁵ However, it is challenging to find estimates solely for Johannesburg and to calculate delays and losses that are due to business forum disruption. The last measurement came in the Johannesburg Development Agency's mid-year report for 2017/2018, which said that in just six months, 'work stoppages in Region E, organized in the main by the so-called Region E Business Forum, have resulted in 13 weeks of lost time and R71 million under-expenditure on specific projects in the region'.²⁴⁶ More up-to-date and regular measures of the true cost of business forum activity are therefore required, which may help generate political will to address the issue.

Track three: Direct predation

Bribe-taking by the JMPD is arguably the most public, well-known and obviously criminal activity involving municipal employees.²⁴⁷ Many motorists in Johannesburg have experienced the frustration of being pulled over for a non-existent offence and being asked for a payment to resolve the matter.

Soliciting bribes is deeply embedded in traffic policing nationwide,²⁴⁸ but the CoJ has faced particularly heavy criticism. There is no consolidated data on the scale of the phenomenon, but public perception and interview accounts indicate that the behaviour is widespread and highly organized within the JMPD, to the point where some traffic stops have become sophisticated extortion operations.

Random traffic stops, planned roadblocks and random raids are all used to generate bribes.²⁴⁹ To set up an illegal roadblock, corrupt JMPD officers will form a team and decide on a time and place that will not be questioned by senior officials. Several illegal roadblocks may be set up in an area to maximize revenue. During the operation, 'ghost' phones – non-smartphones – are used for communication. Proceeds are split equally among the team. Any member who is suspected of being out of line or who goes against the team is severely dealt with by punishment, suspension without pay, or even dismissal after an official investigation.

At times this model may be more flexible depending on the shift leader; if a strait-laced officer is in charge, the other officers will fall in line, but if a corrupt officer takes charge, then it is time to take bribes. As one former officer put it, 'When a *grootkop* [person in charge] is on site and he is *reguit soos 'n paal* [straight], you act accordingly. However, when you have one that *njaga njaga* [plays around], you know now we gonna chow some money'.²⁵⁰

While any motorist is fair game for a bribe – 'No matter how innocent you are, once I pull you over something will be wrong,' said the former JMPD officer²⁵¹ – undocumented migrants are particularly vulnerable to extortion. According to the former officer, they will pay to stay under the radar and generally carry large amounts of cash, as they live outside the banking system. They may also keep the officer as a contact to help get them out of trouble when they face future problems with the law, in exchange for further payment.

Taxis are also targeted for extortion, though on a selective basis.²⁵² According to a taxi association secretary, some JMPD officers own minibus taxis through relatives or friends.²⁵³ These officers are

often used to 'intervene' when the taxi association experiences law enforcement issues, as well as being involved in 'peace talks' between warring taxi firms. When JMPD officers extort taxis, fining the owners and sometimes impounding their vehicles, they reportedly take care to avoid those owned by fellow officers.²⁵⁴

Away from the road, there have been cases of extortion involving municipal employees, including isolated incidents of JMPD officers allegedly trying to extort a business owner at a warehouse and an armed robbery case involving theft of funeral fund contributions.²⁵⁵

Combating rampant bribe-taking in the JMPD is a complex challenge that has long resisted solutions.²⁵⁶ The JMPD has an internal affairs directorate that arrests implicated officers and mounts sting operations; the department even cancelled the 2025/2026 recruitment intake of more than 400 trainees due to alleged bribery and vetting irregularities among at least 52 recruits.²⁵⁷ But as interviews with current and former officers highlighted, this anti-corruption infrastructure is sometimes a contributing factor, with corrupt officers often in charge of the investigation process.

Factionalism within the JMPD has fostered separate groups who 'look after their own': 'Here at JMPD, we should be one unit, but we are not,' reflected one officer. 'This thing [corruption] is driven by certain groups or even tribal clans, and that is where we are vulnerable.'²⁵⁸ The officer gave an example of officers under investigation being cleared of corruption and promoted; once in the higher rank, the officers favour those who supported them during the investigation. 'Now we have a group of corrupt officers being promoted, and this is a vicious cycle that needs to be rooted out.'²⁵⁹ Stigma and pressure were also cited as reasons why officers were reluctant to make allegations of corruption, particularly if they were due for promotion.²⁶⁰ Internal transfers were seen as a way of shifting a corrupt officer elsewhere, rather than dealing with them.

One former officer said that new recruits are often put in the field long before they have completed their training, due to short-staffing. Commonly deployed to corruption hotspots such as traffic management, accident reporting and roadblocks, they are inducted into the system of bribe-taking: 'You do as you see and are told, that is the rule on the streets.'²⁶¹

The utilities sphere has also seen numerous instances of municipal employees and contractors extorting customers, often with the threat of disconnection. Unpaid bills, fictitious arrears and invented accusations of meter tampering are used as leverage. There have been numerous cases of City Power employees and contractors engaging in this practice, with many more incidents probably unreported.²⁶² In one illustrative case, two contractors allegedly offered to reverse a customer's R149 000 debt if they were paid R46 000.²⁶³ A civil society organization said it had been tracking a high number of disconnection threats after 3 p.m. on Fridays, leading people to pay rather than face being disconnected over the weekend.²⁶⁴ There have also been copycat instances of criminals masquerading as utility officials to extort money from unsuspecting customers.²⁶⁵ Finally, and in an intriguing link with the first track, municipal employees have also been accused of extorting R2.6 million from a company that won a tender from the city, after sending the contractor death threats.²⁶⁶



WHAT FUTURE FOR JOHANNESBURG?

Governance failure in the CoJ has given birth to a criminal ecosystem that is accelerating the phenomenon that spawned it and inflicting profound harms on citizens. Fragmented, diffuse and opportunistic in nature, politically connected extraction networks do not appear to be deeply embedded within Johannesburg's underworld (with the possible exception of the JMPD, based on emerging evidence), though they intersect in various ways with criminal actors engaged in theft, sabotage, extortion and violence.

Dismantling this ecosystem is the necessary first step for any progress to be made in returning the city to a solid footing. As the accompanying paper outlines, a serious intervention is required to help the CoJ turn a corner, drawing on civil society and private sector expertise. Relying on the CoJ's own compromised tools and processes will not bear fruit; more innovative and ambitious measures are required. And the urgency of the moment cannot be overstated. When asked about one councillor's theory that the council was participating in a 'last supper' of corruption and fraud before the local elections in November, another councillor scoffed. 'Last supper? They've already cleared the dishes.'²⁶⁷

Whoever takes political control will have to work within a constricted space. The city's financial situation is dire, with concerns that Johannesburg could face bankruptcy. Even if it does not reach that point, the next administration will have to work for at least six months within the city's underfunded 2026/2027 budget and structural afflictions.

The predicament facing Johannesburg's citizens looks unlikely to improve in the short term. The infrastructure backlog is too large, the level of disrepair too great, the dysfunction and incompetence too chronic for service delivery to improve with the flick of a switch. Yet even though the returns may be a long time coming, the city must start now. If it continues down the same path, there is a real prospect that South Africa's economic powerhouse, accounting for 16% of GDP, will face critical challenges, with huge national implications.²⁶⁸ As one councillor put it, 'This is Johannesburg's last chance. Either it will flourish or it will fail.'²⁶⁹



NOTES

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