

Safety and Social Control in Informal Settlements in Gauteng: A Case Study of Marry Me Informal Settlement

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ABSTRACT: Rapid urbanisation and persistent housing shortages have contributed to the growth of informal settlements across South Africa. These settlements often experience high levels of crime, weak social control and limited access to essential services. This study examines safety and social control dynamics in informal settlements in Gauteng Province, using the Marry Me informal settlement in Soshanguve as the primary case study. Comparative insights were also drawn from other settlements including KgeilaBorokgo in Soshanguve, Mamelodi East, Diepsloot and Tembisa. The findings indicate that informal settlements are characterised by high crime levels, poor spatial planning, governance challenges and persistent socio-economic deprivation. While community safety structures demonstrate resilience, limited institutional resources and fragmented coordination weaken their effectiveness. The study concludes that addressing safety challenges in informal settlements requires integrated governance approaches, improved policing capacity and community-inclusive urban planning strategies.

METHODOLOGY: This study used a qualitative research design to examine safety, governance and socio-economic conditions in informal settlements in Gauteng. The approach was appropriate for capturing in-depth experiences and institutional perspectives in complex urban settings. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and field observations involving residents and key stakeholders, including SAPS, CPFs, municipal officials and officials from the Departments of Home Affairs and Social Development. These methods allowed flexibility in responses, enabled shared community insights and supported contextual understanding through direct observation. Data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and recurring themes across all data sources. Method triangulation enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings.

KEYWORDS: Informal Settlements, Safety and Social Controls, Community Safety and Crime

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I. INTRODUCTION

The growth of informal settlements, slums and poorly serviced residential areas has become a global phenomenon driven largely by rapid urban population growth (Avis, 2016). Approximately 25% of the world's urban population currently resides in informal settlements, with an estimated 213 million additional people having moved into such areas since 1990 (Avis, 2016 & Comins, 2023). Of the nearly one billion people living in slums globally, about 238 million are located in Southern Africa (Comins, 202 & Safact, no date). In South Africa, the number of informal settlements increased significantly from about 2,700 in 1995 to more than 4,297 by 2011 (Department of Human Settlements, 2021). Projections further indicate that Africa's population will double between 2025 and 2050, with two-thirds of this growth expected to occur in urban and metropolitan areas (Trilogue Knowledge Hub, 2024 & Comins, 2023). Poor economic conditions in South Africa have forced many low-income households to settle in overcrowded informal settlements, often as the only viable housing option (Comins, 2023 & Gamede, 2024). Despite government housing programmes, informal settlements remain a persistent feature of the country's urban landscape (Comins, 2023 & Gamede, 2024). Estimates suggest that undocumented immigrants constitute between 10% and 15% of South Africa's population, many of whom reside in informal settlements due to limited housing alternatives (Eisenberg and Associates, 2019). At the same time, rapid urbanisation continues, with projections suggesting that by 2030 nearly 70% of South Africans will live in cities and towns, many within informal settlements (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2015).

The global commitment to adequate housing was reinforced in 1996 through the Habitat Agenda adopted at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), which emphasized sustainable human settlement development and recognised housing as a fundamental human right (United Nations, 2015). Housing plays a crucial role in meeting basic human needs by providing safety, shelter stability and forming the foundation for individual welfare and broader social and economic development (Wahba and Bridwell, 1976;

McLeod, 2018 & Henilane, 2016). In South Africa, this right is constitutionally protected with Section 26 of the Constitution obligating the state to take reasonable legislative and other measures to progressively realise access to adequate housing (Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa, 2018). Rapid urbanisation, particularly in Gauteng metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg, Pretoria and Ekurhuleni has accelerated the expansion of informal settlements (Comins, 2023 & Gamede, 2024). These settlements increasingly accommodate both internal migrants and undocumented foreign nationals seeking employment opportunities (Comins, 2023 & Gamede, 2024). However, the growth of such areas has also been associated with rising levels of crime, creating fear and insecurity among residents and community safety structures such as Community Policing Forums (CPFs) and patrollers (Dube, 2025 & Moloi, 2025). In these contexts, safety is often shaped by the interaction between formal and informal social control mechanisms (Dube, 2025 & Moloi, 2025). While formal control operates through state institutions such as the criminal justice system, informal control emerges from community norms, social cohesion, and local leadership structures (Innes, 2003; Sampson, 1986; Hunter, 2000 & Gibbs, 1981). In areas where state presence is limited, informal social control becomes particularly important in maintaining order and supporting community-based crime prevention (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005).

1.2 Aim of the Article

The aim is to present the findings of the study to investigate various factors that impact safety and social control in informal settlements within Gauteng Province, with a specific focus on the 'Marry Me' informal settlement in Soshanguve, Pretoria, as a case study.

1.3 Objectives of the study

- To investigate the safety conditions and social control mechanisms present in the informal settlements of Gauteng province.
- To analyse the key challenges faced by informal settlements in Gauteng province.
- To examine existing strategies aimed at addressing living conditions in informal settlements as implemented by government departments.
- To propose evidence-based solutions for improving conditions in informal settlements.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section introduces the concept of informal settlements and examines safety and social control within these areas in Gauteng. It highlights the prevalence of informal settlements, challenges faced by residents and government whilst proposing solutions and recommendations.

2.1 Informal settlements, urban migration and land invasion in Gauteng

Informal settlements, or shanty towns are communities not officially recognized by the government, often comprising improvised dwellings made of low-cost materials and lacking basic services such as water, sanitation and electricity (Housing Development Agency, 2012; Nkoane, 2019 & Sanders, 2025). These settlements typically develop on vacant, disputed or environmentally sensitive land near urban areas, offering proximity to work opportunities despite non-compliance with planning regulations (Patel, 2013; United Nations, 2015 & Sheth, 2017). In Gauteng, informal settlements have expanded rapidly, driven by rural-urban migration and population growth (Safacts, no date; Comins, 2023 & City of Johannesburg, 2018). By 2014, 19% of Gauteng households lived in informal settlements, with Johannesburg alone housing over 180,000 households by 2018 (Safacts, no date; Comins, 2023 & City of Johannesburg, 2018). Land invasion or the illegal occupation of land to establish dwellings has become a major factor in the growth of these settlements, straining public resources and worsening housing backlogs (South African Local Government Association, 2018; Jordan, 2020 & Mokgatle, 2021). The expansion of informal settlements is fuelled by a shortage of affordable housing, poverty, unemployment, weak urban planning, limited state land allocation and economic pressures, including those exacerbated by the pandemic (Department of Human Settlements, 2003; Staff Writer, 2020 & Dlamini, 2021).

2.2 Challenges government encountered with informal settlements

Governments face multiple interconnected challenges in managing informal settlements, which hinder policy implementation and sustainable urban development (GSDRC, 2016). Key issues include legal and land tenure as settlements are often established illegally complicating service delivery, regulation enforcement and redevelopment plans (GSDRC, 2016 & United Nations, 2015). Informal settlements frequently lack basic infrastructure and services such as water, sanitation, electricity, roads and waste management, creating health risks and contributing to crime due to limited governance and security presence (United Nations, 2015 & Comins, 2023). Evictions can also trigger social unrest and political backlash (GSDRC, 2016; United Nations, 2015 & Comins, 2023). Additionally, many settlements are undocumented, making it difficult to accurately

assess populations, plan services and allocate resources (United Nations, 2015). Addressing these issues requires substantial financial investment for infrastructure upgrades, relocation and affordable housing projects which often demands long-term planning and resources (GSDRC, 2016 & United Nations, 2015).

2.3 Challenges of a high influx of undocumented persons

South Africa faces significant challenges from illegal immigration and porous borders, as many undocumented foreign nationals settle in informal settlements increasing pressure on housing, healthcare, and education (Seboko, 2024 & Comins, 2023). The high demand on public services strains resources meant for citizens and worsens urban overcrowding (Seboko, 2024). Economic pressures and a 32.9% unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa, 2025) have led to the exploitation of undocumented workers, fuelling local resentment and occasional xenophobic violence, which further burdens government and law enforcement (Seboko, 2024 & Majola, 2024). Undocumented status also complicates policing and contributes to higher crime rates in informal settlements (Erasmus, 2022 & Seboko, 2024). The influx of refugees and asylum seekers strains the asylum system, prolongs legal uncertainty and creates integration challenges due to cultural and social differences, occasionally intensifying tensions and xenophobia in host communities (Seboko, 2024 & Erasmus, 2022). Comprehensive immigration reform, better community integration and improved border and labour enforcement are needed to address these pressures (Seboko, 2024 & Erasmus, 2022).

2.4 Other challenges facing inhabitants of informal settlements

Residents of informal settlements are often disadvantaged due to their location on the urban periphery and limited access to markets, services, infrastructure and economic opportunities (GSDRC, 2016). These conditions intensify existing inequalities, particularly for women, who face greater barriers to accessing healthcare, education, safety and livelihood opportunities. Women in informal settlements often spend significant time and effort obtaining basic services, which reduces their opportunities for paid employment (GSDRC, 2016).

2.4.1 Crime and gangsterism in informal settlements

Crime remains a major concern in South Africa, with high levels of violent crime such as murder, attempted murder, robbery and carjacking reported in recent years (SAPS, 2022; Lamb, 2025 & Staff Writer, 2018). The country ranks among those with the highest crime rates globally and Gauteng's metropolitan areas, including Johannesburg and Pretoria, experience particularly high levels of criminal activity (World Population Review, 2022 & McCain, 2022). Informal settlements in Gauteng have also reported increasing crime, worsened by poor housing conditions, insecurity and limited police presence (Makoe, 2025; Dube, 2025; Moloi, 2025 & GSDRC, 2016). Gangsterism further intensifies insecurity in these settlements (Sibiya, 2021 & Makoe, 2025). Gangs often control access to essential resources such as water, electricity and shelter, forcing residents to pay for these services through extortion (Sibiya, 2021 & Makoe, 2025). They maintain control through intimidation, violence and criminal activities including burglary, robbery and drug trafficking (Sibiya, 2021 & Makoe, 2025). Young people are frequently recruited into gangs, exposing them to violence and criminal behaviour at an early age, while residents live in constant fear of gang activity (Sibiya, 2021; Dube, 2025 & Moloi, 2025). The persistence of gangs in informal settlements is linked to broader socio-economic conditions such as poverty, high youth unemployment, limited education and weak governance (Leggett, 2004; Gallagher, 2019 & Shaw and Skywalker, 2016). Limited policing and poor infrastructure create power vacuums that allow gangs to establish territorial control and embed themselves within communities, contributing to social fragmentation and ongoing insecurity (Leggett, 2004; Shaw and Skywalker, 2016 & Department of Social Development, 2022).

2.4.2 Community policing and law enforcement challenges in informal settlements

Community Policing Forums (CPFs) were established to promote cooperation between the police and communities in addressing crime. The National Peace Accord of 1991 and the Interim Constitution of 1993 introduced mechanisms for police accountability, while the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995 formally recognised CPFs as consultative platforms where communities, organisations and stakeholders engage with the police on local crime prevention initiatives (Malatji, Madima; Rakubu, 2023 & SAPS, n.d.). The CPFs monitor police performance, conduct patrols, report safety concerns and provide recommendations to policing authorities (Dube, 2025 & Moloi, 2025). However, in many informal settlements, CPF members and community patrollers themselves face threats and violence from criminal gangs (Dube, 2025 & Moloi, 2025). Policing informal settlements is further complicated by the lack of infrastructure such as street lighting, road names and formal addresses which delays police response times and makes it difficult to locate victims during emergencies (Majola, 2024 & Buthelezi, 2025). Rapid settlement growth and limited accessibility also hinder law enforcement operations and the regulation of activities such as informal liquor outlets, making crime prevention and enforcement more challenging in these communities (Majola, 2024 & Buthelezi, 2025).

2.5 Legislative and constitutional mandate governing immigration in South Africa

South Africa's immigration framework is grounded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which guarantees fundamental rights to everyone within the country, including non-nationals (South African Government, 1996). Key rights include equality before the law, human dignity, freedom and security of the person and just administrative action, requiring immigration control measures to comply with constitutional standards of fairness and human rights (South African Government, 2026a). The Immigration Act 13 of 2002 regulates the admission, residence, detention and deportation of foreign nationals and defines procedures for dealing with undocumented migrants (South African Government, 2026a & South African Government, 2026b). Protection for asylum seekers and refugees is provided through the Refugees Act 130 of 1998, which incorporates the principle of non-refoulement and governs refugee status determination (South African Government, 2026c). These domestic laws are reinforced by international obligations, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention which require South Africa to balance immigration control with the protection of human rights and refugee standards (South African Government, 2026c).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative instrumental case study design to examine safety and social control in informal settlements in Gauteng, focusing on Marry Me in Soshanguve, Pretoria. The qualitative approach was selected because it enabled an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, governance challenges and community safety dynamics within real-life informal settlement contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2010; Hassan, 2024).

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus group discussions and field observations involving SAPS, municipal officials, the Departments of Home Affairs and Social Development, CPFs, community patrollers, ward councillors and residents. These methods allowed the researcher to capture diverse perspectives, flexible responses and direct contextual insights from the settlements (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Klenke, 2008; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience regarding community safety in informal settlements. This sampling strategy ensured that information-rich participants from government departments, law enforcement agencies, community structures and civil society organizations were included. The study comprised the following participants:

Table: 1

Data Collection Method	Participants	Sample Size
Semi-structured interviews	CareNet NGO	1
	Tshwane Metropolitan Police Department (Land Invasion Unit)	1
	Department of Social Development	2
	City of Tshwane (Health, Human Settlements and Social Development Units)	7
	Department of Home Affairs (Immigration Unit)	2
	Soshanguve SAPS (VISPOL Commander, Station Commander and Community Development Workers)	3
Subtotal: Semi-structured interviews		16
Unstructured interviews	Gauteng Department of Community Safety (Deputy Directors)	2
	Ward Councillor (Marry Me)	1
	Focus group (CPF members, patrollers and Community-in-Blue representatives in Mamelodi East, Diepsloot, Marry Me, KgeilaBorokgo and Tembisa)	5 focus group*
Subtotal: Unstructured interviews		3 individual participants + 5 focus group of 10-15
Observations	Informal settlements (Mamelodi East, Diepsloot, Marry Me, KgeilaBorokgo and Tembisa)	5 sites

- 16 participants took part in semi-structured interviews.
- 3 individuals participated in unstructured interviews, in addition to five focus groups comprising Community Policing Forum (CPF) members, patrollers, and Community-in-Blue representatives.
- Observations were conducted across five (5) informal settlements.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes across interviews, focus groups and observations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of multiple qualitative methods strengthened triangulation, credibility and the depth of the findings (Hassan, 2024).

IV. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to established ethical research principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. Permission was obtained from all participants before data collection and they were informed of the study's purpose and assured that participation was voluntary and that their identities would remain confidential. In addition, the Directorate: Research, Policy and Information Management of the Gauteng Department of Community Safety complied with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), 2013, ensuring that all personal information collected during the study was securely managed and protected against unauthorized access, disclosure, or loss.

V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The research focused on the dynamics of safety and social control in selected Gauteng informal settlements, using Marry Me and KgeilaBorokgo as primary case sites while incorporating comparative insights from other settlements across the province such as Mamelodi East informal settlements (Lusaka, Bufferzone, Extension 11 and 13), Diepsloot (Extension 3, 9 and 13 informal settlements), Tembisa (Winnie Mandela, Extension 13 and 14), Gomora and Mahem in Pretoria West, Zamimpilo (Riverlea) and Tshepisoong (Johannesburg). The findings reveal that safety and governance in informal settlements is shaped by the interaction between formal state institutions and informal community-based systems of control. Participants from the SAPS, municipal departments, the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), Community Policing Forums (CPFs), patrollers and residents demonstrated a shared understanding that formal social control involves law enforcement, municipal regulation, land management and statutory interventions. However, participants consistently argued that weak and inconsistent state presence compels communities to rely heavily on informal social control mechanisms such as CPFs, volunteer patrollers, local leadership structures, faith-based organisations and neighbourhood monitoring systems. These findings align with Sampson's (1986) and Brogden and Nijhar's (2005) arguments that informal social control becomes more prominent in contexts where formal governance structures are weak or inconsistent.

5.1 Land invasion as the driver of informal settlements growth

Participants identified land invasion and unlawful occupation of public and privately owned land as major drivers of informal settlement expansion in Gauteng. Municipal officials, CPFs and councillors reported that organised groups often coordinate invasions and illegally sell plots to vulnerable residents. These settlements generally emerge without planning approval, infrastructure or service provision. According to participants from the City of Tshwane Human Settlements Department, invaded land rapidly develops into overcrowded settlements with narrow pathways, dense shack formations and limited access routes, making policing, emergency response and municipal service delivery extremely difficult. Field observations confirmed that settlements such as Marry Me, Kgeila Borokgo, Diepsloot, Tembisa, Gomora and Mahem in Pretoria West and sections of Mamelodi East are characterised by unsafe spatial layouts, inadequate sanitation, informal electricity connections and poor waste management. Participants further indicated that both South African citizens and undocumented foreign nationals occupy informal settlements due to poverty, unemployment, housing shortages and exclusion from formal housing opportunities. Undocumented migrants were perceived as particularly dependent on informal settlements because they are excluded from state housing programmes and social assistance.

5.2 Living conditions and infrastructure challenges

Participants consistently described living conditions in informal settlements as unsafe, overcrowded and underdeveloped. Residents of Marry Me informal settlement reported living in makeshift shacks ("mekhukhu") without adequate water, sanitation, electricity, roads, schools or healthcare facilities. Similar conditions were observed in Diepsloot, Tembisa, Mamelodi East and other settlements included in the study. Municipal officials and town planners indicated that unregulated settlement growth complicates infrastructure planning and service delivery. Narrow pathways and inaccessible terrain restrict the movement of ambulances, fire services and patrol vehicles. According to Mabunda (2021) and Gamede (2024), poorly planned settlement layouts significantly weaken emergency response capacity and governance effectiveness. Illegal electricity and water connections emerged as major safety concerns. Participants from CPFs and community patrollers explained that exposed electrical wires frequently cause fires, electrocution and infrastructure damage. In some settlements, gangs and extortion networks illegally connect electricity from pylons and force residents to pay

monthly fees for access to power and “protection services”. Residents stated that refusal to pay often results in threats, violence or destruction of property. Water insecurity was also widespread. Participants reported that municipal water tankers are often irregular, insufficient and located far from residential areas, particularly affecting elderly residents and vulnerable households. Municipal officials acknowledged that illegal water connections damage infrastructure and reduce water availability to surrounding formal communities.

5.2.1 Utilities and infrastructure challenges in Gauteng informal settlements

Informal settlements across Gauteng experience severe deficits in basic services, particularly electricity and water provision. Field observations indicate widespread illegal electricity connections, especially in Marry Me and Mamelodi East, where residents tap directly from high-voltage pylons or use makeshift transformers to supply multiple dwellings. Community Policing Forums (CPFs) and community patrollers reported that exposed wiring frequently crosses open spaces and pedestrian pathways, creating significant safety risks. During rainfall, cables have been observed sparking or emitting smoke, increasing the likelihood of fires, electrocution and related hazards, particularly affecting children. Stakeholders, including ward councillors, emphasised the need for coordinated municipal and Eskom interventions, including safe, community-based electrification programmes. Participants further highlighted that electricity access in some settlements has become commercialised through extortion networks linked to weak governance and limited state presence. Gangs and informal power structures illegally connect electricity and impose monthly payments on residents. In some cases, households are also required to pay for informal “security services,” with non-payment resulting in threats, violence or disconnection of services. These practices effectively criminalise access to basic utilities, reinforce parallel governance systems and undermine municipal authority.

Although the City of Tshwane, in collaboration with Eskom, has undertaken disconnection of illegal electricity connections through intervention programmes, stakeholders reported that such connections are frequently re-established, perpetuating safety risks and service delivery challenges. Similar patterns were observed in relation to water supply. Illegal water connections were reported to disrupt municipal infrastructure and reduce supply to formal areas. Municipal water tanker services, coordinated through ward councillors, are used as an interim measure; however, residents reported inconsistencies in delivery, long distances to collection points and insufficient supply. Concerns were also raised regarding the condition of some tanker vehicles, with potential public health implications. These challenges are evident across multiple settlements, including Diepsloot, Gomora and Tembisa. Overall, the combined effects of illegal utility connections, infrastructural deficits and unplanned settlement layouts significantly heighten safety and health risks, while simultaneously undermining efficient and sustainable municipal service delivery.

5.3 Socio-economic conditions and child vulnerabilities

Participants from the Department of Social Development described informal settlements as environments characterised by chronic poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and limited economic opportunities. Social grants were identified as the primary source of income for many households, although participants noted that these grants remain insufficient to meet basic needs. Residents, SAPS officials, CPFs and DSD participants reported that children in informal settlements are highly vulnerable to abuse, neglect, gang recruitment and substance abuse. High unemployment, parental absence and overcrowded living conditions contribute to child-headed households and inadequate supervision. Participants explained that children are frequently exposed to violence, criminal activity and drug use from an early age. The DSD participants indicated that community organisations, faith-based groups and NGOs such as CareNet provide important support services despite limited resources. However, they emphasised that staffing shortages, limited transport and high demand continue to undermine effective social interventions.

5.4 Prevalent Crimes in the high-risk informal settlements

Crime emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing informal settlements in Gauteng. Participants from SAPS, CPFs and community structures reported high levels of petty theft, assault, armed robbery, housebreaking, gender-based violence, extortion, illegal firearm possession and drug trafficking. Participants identified informal settlements as major hotspots for the sale of illicit drugs such as nyaope, dagga and methamphetamine. Illegal shebeens and informal tuckshops were also reported to facilitate the distribution of counterfeit alcohol, stolen goods and illegal cigarettes.

Gang activity was identified as particularly severe in settlements such as Marry Me, Diepsloot, Mamelodi East and parts of Tembisa. Participants explained that gangs frequently engage in extortion, violence and territorial control. Community patrollers and residents stated that criminal groups exploit the informal layout of settlements to evade law enforcement and establish alternative systems of authority. Participants further reported that some undocumented foreign nationals participate in criminal networks operating within informal settlements. However, the findings also indicate that undocumented migrants themselves remain vulnerable to exploitation, violence and exclusion. Participants from the Department of Home Affairs and

Department of Social Development stressed that informal settlements simultaneously function as spaces of refuge, survival and criminal activity, thereby complicating governance and policing efforts.

The findings support previous studies which link poor infrastructure, overcrowding and socio-economic exclusion to heightened crime and insecurity in informal settlements (Chant, 2013 & McIlwaine, 2013).

5.5 Policing constraints and weak state presence

Participants consistently argued that policing in informal settlements is severely constrained by environmental, operational and institutional challenges. SAPS and Tshwane Metro Police Department (TMPD) participants stated that the absence of formal roads, street names and navigable pathways limit patrol visibility and emergency response. Residents of Marry Me informal settlement expressed strong dissatisfaction with policing services. During the Premier's community engagements in March 2025, residents complained about delayed police responses, poor communication from investigating officers and the failure to arrest known perpetrators. Community members argued that inadequate policing forced residents to establish volunteer patrol groups for self-protection. Participants from SAPS and TMPD highlighted shortages of operational vehicles, personnel and equipment as major limitations. As a result, policing in informal settlements was described as reactive rather than preventative. Similar concerns were raised regarding SAPS Mobile Units donated by the Gauteng Department of Community Safety (GDCS). Although the mobile units improved short-term visibility and victim support, participants argued that they were rarely stationed inside informal settlements themselves.

Community safety structures such as CPFs, patrollers and Community-in-Blue volunteers were identified as important actors in local crime prevention. However, participants reported that these volunteers operate with minimal training, inadequate protective equipment and limited institutional support. Patrollers described operating in dangerous conditions where retaliation and ambushes are common. Participants from DSD, DHA and municipal departments further indicated that many officials fear entering high-risk informal settlements without police escorts due to gang activity and extortion networks. This fear weakens service delivery, governance oversight and formal social control.

5.6 Immigration, undocumented foreign nationals and social tensions

The study found that competition over scarce resources such as housing, employment, water and informal trading spaces has intensified tensions between South African residents and undocumented foreign nationals in settlements such as Marry Me, Kgeila Borokgo, Mamelodi East, Diepsloot and Tembisa. Participants reported that these pressures contribute to mistrust, exclusion and, in some cases, xenophobic attitudes, particularly towards migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi. Undocumented foreign nationals were often described as vulnerable to marginalisation and violence, while also being perceived as operating within informal survival networks due to exclusion from formal systems. Participants further explained that undocumented migrants frequently avoid interaction with authorities due to fear of arrest, deportation or victimisation, with language barriers and lack of documentation further limiting participation in community structures and crime reporting. Foreign nationals also indicated exclusion from local decision-making processes, contributing to social fragmentation, parallel survival systems and in some cases verbal abuse, physical assault and forced displacement. Observations during community engagements showed limited participation of foreign nationals in public forums, with structural barriers such as language, fear of deportation and limited access to services further reinforcing exclusion.

Department of Home Affairs (DHA) participants highlighted that the department is constitutionally mandated to enforce immigration legislation while upholding constitutional protections and refugee law. They noted significant operational constraints, including documentation backlogs, limited capacity, legal appeals processes and difficulties in distinguishing between undocumented migrants and asylum seekers under the Refugees Act 130 of 1998. The Immigration Act 13 of 2002 provides the legal framework for enforcement, including detention and deportation procedures, implemented in coordination with agencies such as the SAPS and the Border Management Authority (BMA). However, enforcement is frequently contested by civil society organisations and constrained by constitutional provisions, including Sections 9, 12 and 33 of the Constitution, which guarantee equality, freedom and security of the person, and just administrative action (South African Government, 2026a). Case law such as *Lawyers for Human Rights v Minister of Home Affairs* (2004) reinforces the requirement for procedural fairness in immigration enforcement (Lawyers for Human Rights, 2022), while organisations such as CORMSA, Section 27 and Lawyers for Human Rights continue to advocate for migrant rights, legal protection and humane enforcement practices (CORMSA, 2023). This creates an ongoing governance tension between state enforcement obligations and constitutional and human rights imperatives (CORMSA, 2023).

5.7 Common challenges in the informal settlements identified by participants

Participants across stakeholder groups, including residents, CPFs, community patrollers, SAPS, municipal officials, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and the Department of Social Development (DSD),

identified common structural and operational challenges affecting safety, governance and service delivery in informal settlements. A dominant theme was the severe shortage of resources, including insufficient personnel, limited patrol vehicles, inadequate operational funding and poor infrastructure such as inaccessible roads and lack of lighting. Participants indicated that these constraints undermine effective policing, emergency response and municipal service delivery. Community safety structures, particularly CPFs and community patrollers, were described as committed but operating under difficult conditions characterised by inadequate training, lack of protective equipment and high personal risk exposure. Participants further noted that informal settlements often present hostile and unsafe environments due to organised criminal groups, extortion networks and gang activity. Narrow pathways and densely built shack formations were reported to restrict access for patrol vehicles, ambulances and fire services, while some officials and police officers expressed fear of entering high-risk areas without sufficient support.

Participants also highlighted weak interdepartmental coordination, fragmented planning and reactive rather than preventative interventions. Experts and CPFs pointed to insufficient data systems for monitoring land invasions, crime hotspots and vulnerable households. Collectively, these challenges contribute to weak state presence, persistent crime, constrained service delivery and fragile trust between residents and authorities. The findings therefore emphasise the need for improved institutional coordination, increased resource allocation, strengthened community safety support and enhanced protection for officials and volunteers operating within informal settlements.

5.8 Stakeholder Coordination and Collaborative Governance in Informal Settlements

Stakeholder coordination emerged as a positive finding, with participants expressing willingness to collaborate across institutions to address safety, governance and service delivery challenges in informal settlements. Joint operations and SAPS escorts often enable municipal and social development officials to safely access high-risk areas. DHA participants further indicated that immigration enforcement relies on collaboration with SAPS, the courts and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS). These findings highlight the importance of multi-sectoral governance involving security, judicial, municipal and community structures. However, participants noted that resource limitations and operational challenges continue to undermine the consistency and effectiveness of coordinated interventions.

5.9 Legislative Mandate and Policy Adequacy: Participant Perspectives

Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the legislative and policy frameworks governing safety, service delivery and immigration management in informal settlements. Stakeholders, including DHA officials, municipal departments and community structures, generally viewed existing legislation and policies as adequate and implementable. Participants indicated that the primary challenges relate not to legislative gaps, but to limited resources, operational constraints and the complex security environment within high-density informal settlements. The Immigration Act 13 of 2002 was identified as the only legislation currently under review, particularly regarding administrative and border management provisions. Overall, participants emphasised that implementation challenges, rather than policy deficiencies, remain the main obstacle to effective governance and service delivery.

5.10 Planned Interventions in the Upgrading of Informal Settlements in Gauteng

The study examined planned interventions aimed at improving living conditions, strengthening safety and addressing informal settlement growth across Gauteng.

• Relocating residents in Gauteng's informal settlements

Participants indicated that relocation remains complex due to rapid land invasions, legal requirements under the Prevention of Illegal Eviction (PIE) from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act No. 19 of 1998 and limited municipal capacity. Authorities noted that relocation processes are further complicated by undocumented foreign nationals, lack of formal identification and housing registration challenges. Municipal officials and experts emphasised that evictions must comply with constitutional protections, including the provision of alternative accommodation where necessary, to avoid litigation, social unrest and human rights violations.

• Core roles of Ward Councillors in supporting informal settlements

Ward councillors were identified as key links between residents and municipalities, responsible for raising service delivery concerns, facilitating communication and coordinating ward structures. However, residents in Marry Me expressed dissatisfaction with councillors' responsiveness to issues such as crime, water shortages and illegal dumping, highlighting the need for stronger accountability and proactive local governance.

• **Interventions by Gauteng metropolitan municipalities**

The Gauteng Provincial Government and the City of Tshwane committed to upgrading Marry Me through the construction of RDP houses, flats and supporting infrastructure. Other metropolitan municipalities, including Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg, continue implementing upgrading initiatives such as re-blocking programmes, electrification, sanitation upgrades, serviced stands, high-mast lighting and incremental in-situ upgrading aligned with the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) framework (City of Ekurhuleni, 2021; City of Johannesburg, 2025).

• **Interventions by local and district municipalities in Gauteng**

Local and district municipalities outside major metros mainly provide interim services such as sanitation, water provision and waste removal. However, participants and available evidence indicate that many settlements continue to experience inadequate services and slow progress in formal upgrading projects (Polity, 2022; South African Human Rights Commission, 2021).

• **Safety and Social Development Interventions**

Following the murders of community patrollers in Marry Me, provincial authorities introduced temporary policing and social development interventions, including additional SAPS deployments, community patroller support, youth development programmes and psychosocial services. However, participants indicated that visible policing was short-lived and largely reactive. SAPS Social Crime Prevention Units in areas such as Tembisa continue implementing community engagement, youth dialogues and victim-support initiatives aimed at addressing social vulnerabilities and building trust.

• **Interventions by community safety structures in the informal settlements**

CPFs, community patrollers and Community-in-Blue volunteers reported conducting patrols, crime awareness campaigns, mediation initiatives and rapid incident reporting. These structures collaborate with SAPS, municipalities and social development stakeholders to strengthen local safety, social cohesion and community-based social control mechanisms within informal settlements.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study highlights that informal settlements in Gauteng are shaped by interconnected challenges, including unplanned growth, inadequate infrastructure, crime, extortion, weak governance and socio-economic vulnerability. Limited resources, poor coordination and mistrust between communities and authorities continue to undermine the effectiveness of interventions by municipalities, SAPS, CPFs and other stakeholders. The findings emphasise the need for integrated and community-centred approaches that combine improved policing, inclusive governance, service delivery, urban planning and socio-economic support. Stronger collaboration between government institutions, community structures and residents is essential to promote safety, social cohesion and sustainable informal settlement development.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Strengthening crime prevention and police capacity

This theme focuses on improving visible policing, crime prevention and coordination between SAPS, CPFs, community patrollers and other stakeholders. It includes enhancing SAPS Mobile Units, improving access to informal settlements, and using technologies such as surveillance drones to support policing in high-risk areas.

7.2 Improving local governance and accountability

This recommendation refers to strengthening land governance, interdepartmental coordination and accountability systems. It includes early detection of land invasion, improved municipal planning, structured stakeholder engagement and transparent communication between government institutions and communities.

7.3 Addressing socio-economic vulnerabilities

This theme focuses on reducing poverty, unemployment and social exclusion through improved social support services, youth empowerment, informal business support and access to basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity and waste management.

7.4 Strengthening social cohesion and reducing xenophobia

This recommendation refers to promoting inclusive governance, peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution through civic education, mediation training, community dialogue and the inclusion of both South African citizens and foreign nationals in local community structures.

7.5 Institutional reform for informal settlement management

This theme focuses on strengthening coordinated governance through integrated multi-sectoral response units, data-driven planning, improved service delivery coordination and participatory upgrading or relocation strategies aligned with the UISP framework.

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