



Taxi Violence in South Africa: A Review of Literature and Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The taxi industry plays an important role in society by transporting commuters from point A to point B daily. This industry contributes to the economic growth of South Africa. However, it is faced with challenges of violence where taxi associations fight amongst each other due to profitable routes and other factors. Taxi operators, commuters, and community members lose their lives due to this infighting between rival taxi associations. To address taxi violence, law enforcement agencies, taxi associations and all major stakeholders need to execute their functions by ensuring that commuters and community members are safe in the taxi environment. The inability of law enforcement agencies to combat taxi violence is a major problem in South Africa and more should be done to counteract it. This study therefore set out to analyse the causes of taxi violence in South Africa. This qualitative article adopted the non-empirical research design: Systematic review. This study was conducted using purely secondary data. A systematic review was done in detail for the collected literature. Key findings indicated that law enforcement agencies are unable to deal with the scourge of taxi violence in South Africa. The findings further revealed that the deregulation of the taxi industry is the cause of taxi violence in South Africa. Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made. It is recommended that law enforcement agencies should be equipped with resources to combat taxi violence in South Africa. The Department of Transport should regulate the taxi industry and fortify partnerships in the taxi industry.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary challenge facing South Africa's Department of Transport is restructuring the public transportation system, which often conjures images of tragic minibus taxi accidents and casualties on the roads.¹ However, public transport in South Africa is also a symbol of successful Black economic empowerment, as the taxi industry is predominantly owned and operated by Black South Africans, marking it as one of the few sectors where they exercise full control. The minibus taxi industry, an informal yet integral part of the country's transport landscape, faces significant issues, especially concerning violence among taxi associations vying for lucrative routes, with other underlying factors fuelling conflicts within the sector. Known for its frequent violent episodes, commonly labelled as

¹ Arrive Alive, "Minibus Taxis and Road Safety," 2024, <https://www.arrivealive.co.za/minibus-taxis-and-road-safety>.

“taxi wars” or “taxi violence,” this industry continues to battle internal disputes.² The modern minibus taxi industry originated during the apartheid era, taking root in the late 1970s when the need for accessible transport increased as people migrated from rural to urban areas in search of employment and improved living conditions, as apartheid’s segregation laws had concentrated economic opportunities within urban centres.³ Initially, this industry was regulated; however, after deregulation in 1987, there was a surge of new minibus taxi operators keen to profit, which ultimately contributed to today’s highly profitable, multibillion-rand industry that serves over 60% of South Africa’s commuting population.⁴ Due to its profitability and highly competitive nature, taxi owners organized themselves into associations primarily defined by region and, to a lesser extent, specific routes. Over time, these associations gained power and began fiercely defending their territories. Taxi violence in South Africa thus reflects profound challenges within the transportation sector and also exposes larger societal issues, including economic inequalities and institutional weaknesses.

Taxi violence in South Africa disrupts not only the availability of transport services but also erodes public confidence in the reliability and safety of the transportation sector. As taxis are the primary mode of public transportation, the pervasive violence represents a substantial risk to both passengers and industry stakeholders. The transport sector is essential to the South African economy, serving as a vital link for commuters traveling to work, running errands, or even making long-distance journeys across provinces or borders. The increasing demand for transportation continues to drive the sector’s expansion, encompassing various modes of transport such as the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, minibus taxis, e-hailing services, metered taxis, and charter services. With this growing competition, commuters gravitate toward services that best suit their preferences, which are influenced not only by service quality but also by operational differences between transport modes. Additionally, internal greed among taxi association leaders intensifies conflict, as some owners seek to dominate the market by acquiring more vehicles, thereby marginalizing smaller operators. This greed-driven infighting exacerbates the existing violence within the sector, contributing to a volatile atmosphere. Thus this article through a review of relevant literature seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of taxi violence in South Africa by exploring its root causes and offering practical solutions aligned with international standards.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach, relying on relevant data sources and contextual analysis without the application of quantitative methods. The researcher conducted a comprehensive review of literature on taxi violence in South Africa, from January 2023 to May 2024, to understand the issue, identify key challenges, and propose solutions aligned with international best practices. Given the nature of the data required, the study was based predominantly on secondary sources. Information was drawn from government publications, books, academic journals, and other related resources. The data collected from these sources was condensed and analysed through content and contextual analysis to extract relevant and actionable insights. Deductive synthesis was applied, and the findings were then organized into sections corresponding to the study’s objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges of the Transport Sector

A. Deregulation of the Taxi Industry

A significant driver of violence in South Africa’s minibus taxi industry is the lack of effective regulation, which results in a largely uncontrolled environment with limited oversight regarding safety

² Londeka Ngubane, Sazelo Mkhize, and Sogo Angel Olofinbiyi, “Taxi Violence in South Africa: Insight from Mpumalanga Township, Kwazulu-Natal Province, South Africa,” *African Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* 9, no. 3 (2020): 81.

³ Ngubane, Mkhize, and Olofinbiyi, “Taxi Violence in South Africa: Insight from Mpumalanga Township, Kwazulu-Natal Province, South Africa.”

⁴ Innocentia Nthabeleng Molefe, “The Policing of Taxi Violence in Stanger Area” (University of South Africa, 2016).

standards, operating norms, and fare structures.⁵ This unregulated environment enables operators to sidestep legal requirements, often resorting to violence to resolve disputes or enforce their own rules. Initially, during the 1970s, the minibus taxi industry operated almost covertly, often transporting passengers under the pretense of private car use. Toward the late 1970s, operators exploited a loophole in the 1977 Road Transportation Act, which classified vehicles carrying ten or more passengers as buses, thereby requiring a license. To bypass this, drivers would leave one seat empty in their ten-seat vehicles, operating legally but without a formal license. Despite this workaround, the National Transport Commission and local road transport boards rarely granted licenses to Black operators, and taxis faced stiff competition from government-subsidized railways and bus services on major routes. The 1987 White Paper on Transport Policy, along with the Transport Deregulation Act of 1988, effectively deregulated the industry, legalizing minibus taxis and reshaping the sector as it exists today.⁶ However, this deregulation process was fraught with issues. The permit allocation process was corrupt, with permits awarded to select applicants, resulting in minimal control over the sector. Consequently, emerging taxi associations leveraged their newfound power, often intimidating competitors while authorities remained largely inactive. This lack of regulatory oversight has generated numerous problems, including increased violence, conflicts, and even targeted assassinations.⁷ Dugard noted that deregulation led to a rapid rise in taxi associations, many of which became profitable but often employed exploitative or violent tactics to maintain control.⁸

The National Land Transport Act currently does not regulate these associations, allowing them to exert significant influence over routes without formal oversight, further fuelling violent confrontations for route control.⁹ Associations established de facto rights over routes, with government policies sometimes inadvertently promoting conflicts by creating ambiguities over route rights. Associations have often acted as gatekeepers, limiting access to new operators and sometimes charging prohibitively high fees, which some taxi owners cannot afford. As a result, rival associations form and disputes escalate into violence. State intervention in monitoring and regulating taxi operations is essential to prevent loss of life among commuters and operators alike.

Without adequate government oversight, taxi associations became self-regulating bodies, controlling loading and pricing practices. Soon, however, many associations began using their organizational power to generate income, sometimes through violent means.¹⁰ Legislative measures have since been introduced to transform and restructure South Africa's national land transport system, yet significant gaps in regulation persist. The absence of consistent regulation has allowed disputes over fares, licensing, and routes to intensify, creating opportunities for criminal elements within the industry. Addressing these deregulation issues in the taxi sector requires an integrated approach involving the government, taxi operators, drivers, and commuters. Through a collaborative strategy, the industry can be made safer, more reliable, and more efficient for all stakeholders involved.

B. Fighting over profitable routes vs E-hailing services

An important factor contributing to the conflict in South Africa's minibus taxi industry is the intense competition for profitable routes, especially during high-demand times on busy routes. This competition often escalates into confrontations, not only between taxi operators but also between them and other transport providers like bus and e-hailing services.¹¹ With limited economic growth avenues for many operators, some turn to illicit activities, such as drug trafficking or armed robbery, to

⁵ Loop Taxi., "Violence in the Minibus Taxi Industry," 2023, <https://www.looptaxi.co.za/post/violence-in-the-minibus-taxi-industry-explained>.

⁶ Jackie Dugard, *From Low-Intensity War to Mafia War: Taxi Violence in South Africa, 1987-2000*, vol. 4 (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation Cape Town, 2001).

⁷ Modipa Mmakwena, "Exploration of Distracted Road Users in Road Traffic Accidents in South Africa," *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 5, no. 9 (2022): 62–74.

⁸ Dugard, *From Low-Intensity War to Mafia War: Taxi Violence in South Africa, 1987-2000*.

⁹ K. Boudreaux, "Taxing Alternatives: Poverty Alleviation and the South African Taxi/Minibus Industry," *Minibus Industry*, February 2006.

¹⁰ Arrive Alive, "Minibus Taxis and Road Safety."

¹¹ Loop Taxi., "Violence in the Minibus Taxi Industry."

supplement their income or gain an advantage. Violent incidents often involve shootouts at taxi ranks or calculated attacks on prominent industry figures. These clashes typically revolve around disputes over lucrative routes or competition within taxi associations themselves.¹²

The scarcity of profitable routes, coupled with an oversupply of vehicles, intensifies the situation. Some operators prefer to run multiple vehicles on high-demand routes, monopolizing the income potential instead of diversifying to other areas. Furthermore, some vehicles operate without proper permits, known as "pirating," exacerbating tensions as legal operators view these practices as unfair competition. This surplus of vehicles, limited routes, and a lack of effective regulatory oversight contribute to the cycle of violence, with self-regulated taxi associations often resorting to threats or violence to protect their territories.¹³

E-hailing services have further fuelled the issue, as minibus operators feel financially threatened, fearing a loss of market share to newer, seemingly safer, and more flexible transport options. The competition reached a boiling point when Uber SA launched in August 2013, giving commuters a choice amid dissatisfaction with the minibus industry's reputation for safety issues and unreliability. As the e-hailing model grew, violent confrontations erupted between e-hailing and minibus operators, who saw the new services as infringing on their routes. Minibus operators argue that while they navigate strict licensing processes, e-hailing vehicles benefit from easier entry into the market.¹⁴

C. Inadequate Law Enforcement

Law enforcement's effectiveness in addressing violence within the taxi industry has been hampered by internal issues and alleged corruption.¹⁵ The inquiry into Gauteng's taxi violence revealed that certain law enforcement personnel have vested interests in the taxi industry, which compromises their ability to enforce regulations impartially.¹⁶ Some officers are even involved as operators, further complicating enforcement and reducing trust within the community. Corruption has also led to practices where officers accept bribes from illegal operators, leading to route saturation and heightened conflicts. In response to ongoing challenges, recent legislation grants traffic officers the authority to impound vehicles of persistent offenders rather than continuing with a fine system. This has led to protests from taxi operators, who argue for relaxed regulations and shorter licensing approval periods. This tension has resulted in several incidents of violence, with taxis protesting by causing disruptions and engaging in acts like stoning vehicles or setting buses alight.¹⁷

The lack of stringent enforcement leaves commuters vulnerable to violence and other criminal activities. To improve safety, consistent application of the law and an uncompromising approach to corruption within law enforcement are essential. The SIU's investigation into Limpopo Province's transport department exposed systemic corruption, with fraudulent issuing of operating licenses being linked to the region's "taxi wars."¹⁸ Similarly, officials implicated in tax fraud and irregular contracting have further undermined efforts to regulate the sector. These issues not only compromise the state's authority but create an atmosphere where some operators, emboldened by bribery, view themselves as above the law while others face severe penalties for compliance.¹⁹ For long-term resolution,

¹² K. Thomas, "Murder by Contract: Targeted Killings in Eastern and Southern Africa," 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/GITOC-Murder-by-Contract-Targeted-Killings-ineastern-and-southern-Africa-.pdf>.

¹³ B. Moloto, "Taxi Violence - Roots vs Routes? What Is the Solution?," 2021, <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/columnists/guestcolumn/opinionboikanyo-moloto-taxi-violence-roots-vs-routes-20211017>.

¹⁴ I. J. Marciano, "E-Hailing and Employment Rights: The Case for an Employment Relationship Between Uber and Its Drivers in South Africa," 2018, <https://ww3.lawschool.cornell.edu/research/ILJ/upload/Marciano-note-final.pdf>.

¹⁵ Loop Taxi, "Violence in the Minibus Taxi Industry."

¹⁶ T. Kubheka, "Taxi Industry Conflict Exacerbated by Law Officials Who Own Taxis," 2021, <https://ewn.co.za/2021/02/11/taxi-industry-conflictexacerbated-by-law-officials-who-own-taxis-inquiry-says>.

¹⁷ J. Evans and N. McCain, "Taxi Associations Hand Over List of Demands After Violent Cape Protest," 2022, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/taxi-associations-hand-over-list-of-demands-after-violent-cape-protest-20220324-2>.

¹⁸ G. Matlala, "Corrupt Officials Fuel Taxi Clashes," 2019, <https://sundayworld.co.za/news/corrupt-officials-fuel-taxi-clashes/>.

¹⁹ Moloto, "Taxi Violence - Roots vs Routes? What Is the Solution?"

reinforcing accountability among law enforcement, eradicating corruption, and ensuring fair regulatory practices are critical in addressing the issues of violence within South Africa's taxi industry.

D. Misuse of power in the taxi industry

Taxi-related violence has become a prevalent issue across all South African provinces, causing individuals to lose not only their jobs but also, tragically, their lives. The pervasiveness of violence within the taxi industry has created a culture of fear and insecurity among citizens who rely on public transportation daily. This violent environment affects not only those directly involved in the industry such as drivers, owners, and association members but also passengers, who are often caught in the crossfire. The competition for control and dominance within the industry has led to severe consequences for public safety and the economy.²⁰ Intra-industry conflicts are frequently fuelled by disputes over leadership roles in taxi associations and the "bucket system," an unregulated method of collecting money, which often lacks transparency and accountability. Taxi owners often set demanding revenue targets for drivers, with the threat of termination if they fail to meet these benchmarks. Consequently, drivers feel immense pressure to fill their taxis, sometimes resorting to aggressive tactics to attract passengers. At ranks and stops, these tensions can result in confrontations between drivers as they compete for fares. Passengers often feel intimidated, and if they attempt to voice concerns, they may face threats from drivers who seek to maintain control.²¹

Competition within the industry not only heightens conflicts but also leads drivers to divert from their assigned routes or pick up passengers intended for other routes, further escalating hostilities. For example, some drivers circumvent established rules, directly transporting passengers to popular destinations rather than taking them to transfer points. This practice is common in urban centres where traditional minibus taxis compete with new ride-sharing services, leading to frequent incidents of violence and sometimes even criminal charges.²² Minibus taxi passengers report witnessing illegal activities but often refrain from reporting them due to fear of retaliation from drivers who may resort to violent means to protect their interests.²³ This industry culture has led to a reputation of aggression and territoriality, particularly among some drivers, and has created a lasting image of the taxi sector as hostile and domineering.

The misuse of power extends beyond the industry players to certain officials within licensing and transport authorities. In various instances, corrupt officials have issued fraudulent licenses to drivers, exacerbating the industry's lawlessness. For example, several officials from KwaZulu-Natal's Department of Transport were found guilty of selling taxi permits totalling R7 million. These actions not only endanger road users but also contribute to the industry's volatility and violence.²⁴ Additional research has exposed the corruption of some traffic officials, who regularly demand bribes from taxi operators. Commonly referred to as "cold drink" money, these bribes create an expectation among taxi drivers that violating traffic laws can be easily remedied by paying off officials. This practice has severely compromised road safety, with some drivers operating without valid permits or licenses, endangering the lives of other road users.²⁵ The prevalence of corruption and power misuse within the taxi industry, both by industry participants and law enforcement officials, has perpetuated a culture of impunity. Taxi operators, aware that bribes can circumvent legal consequences, often disregard safety regulations and lawful operating practices. To address the pervasive misuse of power within the taxi

²⁰ S. Hlatshaneni, "Taxi Industry in SA Is Giving Some Commuters PTSD," 2021, <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/taxi-industry-in-sa-is-giving-some-commuters-ptsd/>.

²¹ B. Magagula, "Shocking Claims of Cops Being Involved in Hits Heard at Inquiry into Taxi Violence," 2020, <https://witness.co.za/Inn/1143477/shocking-claims-of-cops-being-involved-in-hits-heard-at-inquiry-into-taxi-violence/>; M. Khosa, *Transport and Popular Struggles in South Africa* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2001).

²² S. Danielak, "Infrastructural Violence in Johannesburg's Taxi Industry," 2021, <https://sfb1265.de/en/blog/infrastructural-violence-in-johannesburgs-taxi-industry/>.

²³ Hlatshaneni, "Taxi Industry in SA Is Giving Some Commuters PTSD."

²⁴ O. Singh, "KZN Transport Officials Bust for R7m Taxi Permit Scheme Granted Bail," 2020, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-09-30-kzn-transport-officials-bust-for-r7m-taxi-permit-scheme-granted-bail/>.

²⁵ M M Muthige, "Defensive Advanced Driving, Law Enforcement and Working Conditions: A Minibus Taxi Driver's Perspective" (Southern African Transport Conference, 2022).

industry, there is a critical need for regulatory enforcement that is impartial and committed to upholding public safety and legal integrity.

The Case of Inadequate Law Enforcement

The findings highlight that law enforcement agencies struggle to manage the pervasive violence in South Africa's taxi industry. The Gauteng Commission of Inquiry into taxi violence uncovered significant issues, including unresolved cases of violence (over 500) and conflicts of interest, where law enforcement officials have business stakes in the industry, undermining their capacity to impartially enforce the law (Khubeka, 2021). This environment of near-lawlessness endangers commuters daily, with drivers often disregarding traffic regulations, exceeding speed limits, and evading traffic penalties by discarding tickets in front of officials. Many drivers operate unroadworthy vehicles, frequently linked to broader criminal networks, including gangs and syndicates. Corruption extends beyond the police, with some politicians also holding interests in taxi businesses, leading to a complex conflict of interests and contributing to the inefficacy of law enforcement in handling taxi violence. The involvement of law enforcement officials as taxi operators has further compounded this issue, creating internal conflicts that impede the effective regulation of the industry (Gauteng Provincial Legislature, 2016).

Deregulation of the Taxi Industry

Deregulation has been a major driver of the industry's violence. Following deregulation in 1987, the industry saw an influx of new operators seeking to capitalize on the high demand for minibus taxi services. Without adequate regulation, the sector quickly attracted criminal elements.²⁶ Competition for routes has intensified, with drivers, associations, and gangs vying for control over lucrative routes and profits. This often leads to violent confrontations. The current National Land Transport Act lacks provisions for direct oversight of taxi associations, allowing them to operate independently and establish control over routes without regulatory guidance. This absence of clear regulations has led to violent disputes, with associations poaching passengers and encroaching on each other's territories, further exacerbating tensions.²⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address taxi violence, collaboration between the Department of Transport, the police, and taxi associations is essential for establishing safety measures and reducing taxi violence. Effective law enforcement is compromised by the involvement of officials in the taxi business, and political inertia has further hampered progress in reducing violence and the development of a comprehensive, proactive regulatory framework with a dedicated oversight body to monitor compliance could mitigate violence in the industry. Formalizing the ownership structure would ensure accountability, particularly for those inciting violence. Furthermore, the study recommends that law enforcement personnel be prohibited from owning taxis to eliminate conflicts of interest, as outlined in Section 13 of the National Land Transport Act, which restricts the transportation of passengers for profit by officials and their immediate families. A commitment to regulatory reform and clear boundaries for law enforcement involvement could help curb the violence plaguing South Africa's taxi industry, fostering a safer and more equitable public transport system. The study also recommends that law enforcement agencies should be equipped with more resources to combat taxi violence and fortify partnerships with major stakeholders in both the public and private sectors.

²⁶ Molefe, "The Policing of Taxi Violence in Stanger Area."

²⁷ Boudreaux, "Taxing Alternatives: Poverty Alleviation and the South African Taxi/Minibus Industry"; L. Anderson, "Why Are Taxis so Dangerous in South Africa?," 2024, <https://www.quora.com/Is-the-taxi-industry-in-South-Africa-considered-the-most-dangerous-in-the-world#:~:text=Violence is apparent among taxi,generates the most income%2C etc.>

CONCLUSION

This analysis has aimed to review the roots of taxi violence in South Africa, identifying core issues such as inadequate law enforcement, deregulation, and the misuse of power within the industry. The lack of structured oversight allows conflicts to proliferate, particularly concerning profitable routes, entry fees, and power dynamics within associations. Because the taxi industry operates largely outside government regulation, it is challenging for authorities to implement policies that would address the sector's systemic violence.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

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