



# TOW-TRUCK TURF WARS

By **Kotie Geldenhuys**; Photos courtesy of **Wikimedia** and **Unsplash**

When Thavendhren "Joe" Naicker, owner of Gypsy Towlines, returned to his home in Sunford Drive in Phoenix, Durban on the evening of Sunday, 26 October 2019, he anticipated spending time with his three young children after he had recently become a widower. However, he never made it inside. While turning onto his street, an SUV abruptly passed him, made a U-turn and headed towards him. The SUV stopped in front of Joe's tow-truck and two men exited the vehicle, wielding high-calibre weapons as they approached him. Joe was discovered slumped over the steering wheel and emergency medical personnel pronounced him dead at the scene. In a short space of time, Joe became the third victim of shootings believed to be connected to the rivalry among tow-truck operators in the area (Khan, 2019).

**T**ow-trucks serve various purposes, including clearing broken-down vehicles and those involved in vehicle crashes. Traffic authorities even use them to enforce parking regulations on both public and private property. Tow-truckers further handle the removal and transportation of vehicles undergoing impoundment or repossession due to payment default. The towing industry presents significant opportunities for entrepreneurs and companies, but it is marked by fierce competition and often lacks proper regulation (Dandurand, 2021).

While tow-truck operators play a crucial role in assisting motorists, many motorists perceive them as a hazard, especially when multiple companies compete to reach road crash scenes. These operators often disregard traffic regulations, speeding through red traffic lights, crossing islands and narrowly avoiding pedestrians and other vehicles in pursuit of profit. This pursuit of financial gain is evident from several cases such as

this experience reported on by the [Cape Argus](#) in July 2017. Following a road crash involving her Toyota Yaris, a woman found herself facing a hefty bill of R11 500 from West Coast Towing for towing, salvage and storage services. Despite protests, the company's manager defended the charges as standard industry rates. The breakdown of the invoice revealed charges including R4350 for salvage, R1500 for roll-back service, R1500 for recovery, R1750 for storage, R650 for security and an administration fee of R900. There was also an additional R850 fee if the vehicle needed to be towed to her insurance company for assessment. The towing company insisted on full payment before releasing the vehicle, and although her insurance offered to cover the costs, she would ultimately be responsible for reimbursing them. Despite the offer of a discounted release price of R9500, the situation highlights the lucrativeness associated with the towing industry (Mtyala, 2017).

## The link between tow-trucks and organised crime

We typically associate organised crime with drug cartels, human trafficking rings and wildlife poachers. However, virtually any service or commodity can be turned into a lucrative criminal enterprise under the right circumstances. The tow-truck industry, often overlooked, harbours a hidden presence of organised crime (Carmody, 2021). In recent years, criminal organisations have infiltrated, competed violently and gained control over segments of the tow-truck industry in various regions worldwide, jeopardising the safety of drivers, clients and the public, while generating substantial profits for these groups. Through corruption, bribery and monopolising government contracts, organised criminals have entrenched themselves within the industry, with the visible and aggressive aspect of this infiltration termed the "tow-truck wars" (Dandurand, 2021).

"Tow-truck turf wars" sound like something from an action movie, but it is a real-life phenomenon. In essence, it refers to intense competition between towing companies for control over certain areas or routes where they can quickly respond to road crashes, breakdowns or parking violations to tow vehicles. These conflicts can arise due to the potential for lucrative contracts, the demand for towing services in specific areas or even disputes over who has the right to tow from certain locations. Superintendent Mike Slack of the York Regional Police explained that organised crime often stems from an opportunity for financial gain coupled with a dangerous level of greed, ultimately leading to criminal behaviour and violence. He pointed out that the lack of regulation in the towing industry's has directly fostered such an environment (CBC News, 2020).

A June 2021 publication from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC) entitled [Tow-truck wars - How organised crime infiltrates the transport industry](#), highlights how organised crime groups often find it relatively easy to infiltrate, hijack or monopolise segments of the local or national transportation sector without attracting significant attention from policymakers or law enforcement agencies. Typically, law enforcement or policy responses are only triggered when such criminal infiltration escalates into violent clashes among criminal factions, or when public concern arises due to violent confrontations between towing operators (Dandurand, 2021). This is what happened in May 2020, after four tow-truck drivers were killed and vehicles were set alight in Toronto, Canada, leading local law enforcement to disclose that at least four organised crime groups were stirring up chaos in the city's towing industry. They initiated "Project Platinum," resulting in the arrests of 20 people, the confiscation of 11 tow-trucks and the seizure of numerous firearms (CBC News, 2020).

According to the GI-TOC report, competition within the transport industry tends to be territorial, with access to market shares linked to a group's dominance within a specific region. In the case of the tow-truck industry, territorial control is crucial for three reasons:

- Rapid response to service calls within specific areas;
- securing lucrative government contracts often tied to specific territories; and
- the territorial nature of organised crime groups, which assert influence within defined geographical boundaries.

Yvon Dandurand, a criminologist at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, Canada, and the author of the abovementioned GI-TOC report, explains that once organised crime infiltrates the industry in a particular area, towing operators who disregard the informal territorial agreements imposed by criminal groups face threats, retaliation and violence. Payment for organised crime protection becomes a necessity, where operators are essentially "taxed" by criminal organisations based on their revenue generation (Dandurand, 2021).

## Why are organised crime groups interested in the towing business?

A 2017 report by Montreal's Inspector-General Denis Gallant highlighted why organised crime found the towing industry attractive, as it seamlessly integrated with other illicit endeavours such as drug trafficking, vehicle theft, pimping, money laundering and loansharking. He remarked that tow-trucks, idling on the roads, awaiting a call for assistance, provide an opportune environment for engaging in additional criminal activities (Edwards, 2020).

Prof Dandurand pointed out several factors driving the interest of organised crime groups in the towing business:

- The operation of tow-truck services, particularly in environments with limited competition, can prove highly profitable on its own. Contracts for vehicle towing services, whether from public or private entities, often yield significant financial gains. In the public sphere, the awarding of these contracts may be influenced by collusion, corruption or intimidation. This creates frequent openings for organised crime syndicates to secure a local monopoly, driving up the prices of towing contracts in both the public and private sectors. By controlling towing companies, organised crime groups can effectively monopolise the towing market in a particular area. This allows them to dictate prices, manipulate contracts and eliminate competition, thereby increasing their profits and influence. Thus, the industry becomes fertile grounds for various corrupt practices.

- Towing service providers have the capability to undertake various tasks on behalf of organised crime factions, including:
  - ◆ Obtaining entry into different restricted or safeguarded zones.
  - ◆ Maintaining unremarkable surveillance or patrol of an area, day or night, to avoid drawing unwanted attention.
  - ◆ Covertly transporting illegal drugs or weaponry within a tow-truck, often with plausible deniability for the operators who can feign ignorance about the contents being transported (Dandurand, 2021). In August 2016, Etienne Pel, the national chairperson of the United Towing Association of South Africa (UTASA), highlighted reports of tow-truck drivers allegedly involved in transporting illicit items such as drugs, illegal ammunition and firearms (Dolley, 2016).
  - ◆ Identifying potential targets for vehicle theft and relocating stolen vehicles (Dandurand, 2021). In July 2022, a video surfaced on Facebook showing how a tow-truck was used to steal a bakkie in Cape Town (Facebook, 2022).
  - ◆ Participating in orchestrating various types of vehicle insurance fraud linked to road crashes (Dandurand, 2021) as showcased on an episode of **Carte Blanche** in May 2015. The segment demonstrated how tow-truck companies would offer truck drivers a "quick-fix" solution, deceiving insurance assessors into approving road crash claims. According to Nicky Troll, a **Carte Blanche** producer, the motive behind this was to expose how tow-truck operators enable local transport operators to bypass road safety regulations to commit insurance fraud. She explained: "Insurance companies will deny claims if the vehicle involved is not roadworthy. Neglecting vehicle maintenance makes you legally liable for any accidents that occur" (Greaves, 2015).
- Organised crime groups may use towing companies as fronts for money laundering operations (Dandurand, 2021). Cash generated from illegal activities could be funnelled through the towing business, appearing as legitimate income. A tow-truck business proprietor based in Chesterville, KwaZulu-Natal, claimed: "Many people who get into this business use it as a means to clean 'dirty money' from their drug dealing activity" (Xulu, 2023).

## Easy targets for criminal groups

The tow-truck industry can be vulnerable to exploitation by organised crime groups for several reasons. According to the GI-TOC publication, organised crime typically enters the towing sector through various means such as lending, covert partnerships or debt collection. Many tow-truck operators resort to borrowing money to purchase expensive equipment or overcome financial hurdles, often turning to informal lenders or loan sharks for help. Once organised crime embeds itself into a business, operators often face significant competitive disadvantages, alongside intimidation or extortion tactics. The lack of fair competition among towing service providers leads to some operators going bankrupt or being forced to sell their businesses. Prof Dandurand further elaborated that when small operators struggle with financial obligations, they become particularly vulnerable to coercive actions such as loansharking, coerced partnerships or hostile takeovers by criminal elements. This explains why some tow-truck companies are wholly or partially owned by individuals linked to criminal organisations or their associates. Some towing service providers even act as fronts for enterprises owned or influenced by organised crime

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syndicates. As criminal groups increasingly penetrate this industry, they create new avenues for criminal activities and recruit more people into their networks (Dandurand, 2021).

The GI-TOC report elaborated on how operators often find it helpful to align themselves with organised crime groups. This alignment may stem from seeking physical protection, securing territorial control or gaining access to services and contracts that would otherwise be unavailable due to the monopolistic grip of criminal organisations on certain markets (Dandurand, 2021). Etienne Pel confirmed this by suggesting that numerous tow-truck drivers have reportedly felt compelled to engage gangsters for protection, either for themselves or their companies, or to employ intimidation tactics against others (Dolley, 2016).

## An international problem

Tow-truck wars have become a global concern, manifesting in various forms of violence and criminal activities across different regions. In Canada, criminal syndicates have thrived within Ontario's towing sector since the early 2000s, leading to incidents of illegal towing, arson and even murder in the greater Toronto area (Stumpf, 2022). Similarly, Australia witnessed a surge in arson attacks, assaults and stabbings linked to the tow-truck industry in July 2021. Shockingly, a driver barely escaped death after a vicious machete assault, while another incident saw a woman allegedly kicked in the head by a rival tow-truck operator at a crash scene (Carmody, 2021). In the UK, London's tow-truck industry faces escalating violence, sparking concerns among local drivers and experts about turf disputes. A towing company in London had two of its trucks torched within two days and in a separate incident, a tow-truck driver narrowly survived a shooting after being pursued and fired upon by a rival company's vehicle (Lale, 2022; Charlton, 2022).

## Turf wars in South Africa's tow-truck industry

South Africa provides a revealing glimpse into how organised crime syndicates infiltrate and exert control over various facets of the transportation sector, including the tow-truck industry, which often links with the violence-plagued minibus-taxi industry. (Refer to **Servamus**: July 2022 for an article about taxi violence.) The patterns of organised crime engagement within South Africa's tow-truck industry closely mirror those observed in the country's taxi cartels, likely due to the overlapping involvement of many criminal groups in both sectors. Violence plays an essential role in the taxi industry to determine market shares and establish barriers to entry for new companies (Dandurand, 2021).



The tow-truck industry in Cape Town has for many years been tainted by a grim cycle of violence, intimidation, attacks, stabbings and vehicle damage (Dolley, 2016). These conflicts are rooted in territorial disputes, as some tow-truckers assert their claim over specific operating areas, leading to violent confrontations (Dolley, 2022). In June 2017, two tow-truck drivers in Idas Valley, Stellenbosch, fell victim to suspected retaliatory actions. Clinton Wagner, associated with a faction of the 27s gang, was shot five times while seated in his tow-truck on Merriman Avenue. The following day, Carlyle Adams met a similar fate, allegedly targeted by members of the same gang (Botha, 2017). In August 2022, Adeb Groenemeyer and his partner were gunned down inside their tow-truck in Maitland. Groenemeyer, who was employed by Urban Towing, was pronounced dead at the scene, while his injured girlfriend succumbed to her wounds two days later (Dean, 2022).

While towing-related violence remains widespread in South Africa's gang hub of the Western Cape, its volatility extends beyond provincial borders. Tensions within the industry have been brewing for years, resulting in numerous fatalities. As early as 2005, Parliament was informed that unethical tow-truck companies were illicitly accessing emergency services' communication channels to monitor vehicle crash reports, enabling them to arrive at crash sites ahead of competitors (Dolley, 2016).

For decades, the towing industry in Gauteng has been marked by fierce competition, often escalating into violence. This includes territorial disputes among towing companies, instances of intimidation, physical altercations and targeted assassinations, indicating the

infiltration, if not complete dominance, of criminal elements within the sector. In March 2015, a tow-truck owner was fatally shot on Brickfield Road in Berea, Johannesburg, amid what appeared to be a conflict over towing territory following a road crash. Upon the arrival of the police at Brickfield Road, near the N3 freeway, they encountered tow-trucks and paramedics on-site. As they were occupied with addressing the initial incident and clearing the area, a second crash, involving a white VW Polo colliding with a concrete barrier, happened. While authorities were managing the aftermath of the second crash, they heard gunfire and spotted a man wielding a firearm. The police disarmed the man and discovered the victim of the shooting, identified as 46-year-old Althaf Dawood, the owner of Jumbo's Towing and Breakdown, lying beside the road (Charles, 2015).

Violent clashes have also erupted within Durban's tow-truck industry, marked by a series of disturbing incidents. Media reports from 2019 detailed drive-by shootings and targeted assassinations of three prominent towing company leaders in the city. Tragically, an innocent bystander was struck by a bullet intended for Ralph Gabriel, the head of Street Kings. Gabriel himself fell victim to an ambush in Berea, just two days before Christmas, when his car was surrounded by assailants who unleashed a barrage of gunfire, resulting in his death. Prior to these events, Gabriel had been embroiled in a feud with another towing company, leading to a legal intervention in 2016 that prohibited him from engaging in physical altercations or threats against his rival. The violence escalated in October 2019 when Imthiyaz Khan and Megesh Naidoo, owners of One Stop Towing, were fatally shot along with three others who were wounded during an attack at a petrol station in Durban. The assailants arrived in a vehicle and opened fire indiscriminately, leaving a trail of death and injury. In another incident in July 2019, a tow-truck driver affiliated with KasiBoys was targeted and wounded in a shooting. The wave of violence continued into October 2019 with the assassination of Thavendhren "Joe" Naicker, the proprietor of Gypsy Towlines, as he returned home. These events underscored the dangerous tensions within Durban's towing industry during that period (Khan, 2019).

The owner of a tow-truck company in Chesterville, KwaZulu-Natal, previously mentioned in the article, highlighted that territorial disputes among drivers could escalate into violence. "In KwaZulu-Natal we live by the gun and because we have boundaries you cannot move from Marianhill and come into Chesterville because you would be entering into another tow-truck driver's turf, and that causes issues.

We also operate on a first-come-first-serve system. Issues always arise when the client chooses the cheapest option, which may have been the last to arrive on the scene," he explained. He mentioned that while these boundaries are informally recognised among companies, they are not officially sanctioned (Xulu, 2023). This highlights how violence becomes more prevalent and noticeable as criminal groups compete for dominance.

## Gang links

As mentioned earlier in this article, the involvement of gangs in the tow-truck industry in South Africa is widespread. In September 2022, the **Daily Maverick** reported about suspicions that, prior to his murder in December 2019, former Hard Livings gang leader, Rashied Staggie, had a disagreement with another underworld figure at a tow-truck yard in Cape Town. During that altercation, Staggie reportedly sought security backup from another underworld figure, who was regarded as a rival to the person he had clashed with. An incarcerated gang member has implicated Nafiz Modack, currently in custody and facing multiple charges, in a case related to the murder of a tow-truck driver that occurred approximately three months prior to Staggie's death. These incidents point to significant gang and underworld involvement in the towing industry (Dolley, 2022).

The accusations suggest that many tow-truck drivers have resorted to employing gangsters for their own or their businesses' protection as well as for threatening and intimidating others. Gang members have reportedly also coerced motorists involved in vehicle crashes to use specific tow-truck companies. There have also been persistent allegations of corruption between tow operators and law enforcement personnel, spanning various agencies including SAPS, Metro Police and traffic departments (Dolley, 2016). Mr Pel from UTASA echoed these concerns in September 2022, stating: "There are allegations of drugs, gangsterism and mafia in the towing industry. Until SAPS take this seriously, it will continue and there will be blood on the hands of law enforcers, in our opinion. If not already" (Dolley, 2022).

There have been numerous other examples of criminal activity and murders associated with the towing industry, some of which are connected to organised crime in the Western Cape. In September 2019, Richard Joseph, a tow-truck driver reportedly employed by CF Towing Services, was shot seven times while inside a tow-truck in Cape Town. According to Col Katlego Mogale, a spokesperson for the Hawks, the



shooter was later identified as Abongile Nqodi, who is currently serving a 20-year sentence. Nqodi allegedly carried out the attack under the direction of Nafiz Modack and Ziyaad Poole (a co-accused of Modack's in other cases). In a plea agreement, Nqodi confessed to being a member of the 28s prison gang and the Terrible West Siders' street gang. In a separate incident, in January 2015, tow-truck operator Michael Correia was shot multiple times and his body was found near the Cape Town suburb of Milnerton. Two years earlier, in June 2013, tow-truck driver Linley Summers was fatally stabbed after responding to a road crash scene in Maitland (Dolley, 2022).

## Control rooms and police handheld radios

During police operations, such as raids and searches, authorities occasionally uncover control rooms and police communication equipment, shedding light on the extent of organisation within the industry and corruption within law enforcement. One such an example happened in January 2016, in Blackheath, Cape Town, when the owner of a vehicle-towing company was arrested following a visit by members of the City of Cape Town Metro Police Tactical Response Unit, prompted by a tip-off regarding the presence of illicit firearms and police handheld radios on the premises. During the search, six SAPS radios, a war room base radio and two metro police handheld radios were seized, leading to the owner's arrest (Etheridge, 2016).

In 2017, a police raid exposed a sophisticated "control room" in Morningside, Durban, which used illegal radios to intercept police and emergency service frequencies, providing vehicle crash information to tow-truck operators. This unscrupulous practice involved monitoring police channels to gain insights into vehicle crash locations and emergencies. A man found in possession of emergency service two-way radio equipment was arrested and charged with violating the Telecommunications Act 103 of 1996, possession of suspected stolen property and obstructing justice. A total of 20 two-way radios were confiscated during this operation (Wicks, 2017). In August 2022, a crackdown on tow-truck operators in Mfuleni, Cape Town, resulted in the arrest of two suspects after police members discovered two SAPS handheld radios stolen from the Kleinvele Police Station during a search of tow-trucks in the area (Dolley, 2022).

When it comes to missing radios, it has been reported that some metro police officers are allegedly renting out handheld service radios to tow-truck drivers to facilitate their response to crash scenes more efficiently. This practice arose from cases where officers'

handheld radios were reported stolen or missing and the radio was disabled internally, so instead these officers started renting their handheld radios to tow-truck drivers. However, it remains a challenge to determine how many handheld radios have been rented out, according to J P Smith, Cape Town's Mayoral Committee Member for Safety and Security. "We have auditing systems which show if all the officers' handheld radios are present, but we have had instances where on-duty or off-duty officers hire out radios. They obviously cannot be traced, but these are dismissible offences," he said (Villette and Petersen, 2016).

Similar situations have happened in Canada such as in July 2020, when five police officials from various divisions were suspended due to their involvement in an ongoing turf war. Among them was a police official accused of stealing and duplicating at least one of three encrypted police handheld radios that went missing between February 2018 and December 2019. These radios were intended for tow-truck drivers, who allegedly charged competitors a monthly fee for access to real-time information, potentially giving them an advantage in reaching incidents first (Stumpf, 2022).

André van der Merwe, the Chairperson of the South African Towing and Recovery Association (SATRA), emphasised the violent nature of the towing industry and that it is characterised by intense competition and conflicts over territory. "They vigorously contest their turf and it often ends in bloodshed. This is not something new. The towing industry is a challenging one and it's not a game for soft fellows. It's a rough and tumble space. I feel sorry for the public because they will be caught in the middle of this volatile competition," he remarked (Wicks, 2019).

## Addressing the problem

When confronted with the infiltration of criminal groups into the tow-truck industry, national or local authorities typically favour two primary responses namely regulatory measures and law enforcement actions (Dandurand, 2021). In South Africa, the lack of proper regulation poses the most significant challenge within the towing sector. Despite numerous appeals over the years, efforts to address this issue have been unsuccessful.

In 2016, the National Consumer Commission stressed that it was the responsibility of the Department of Transport to establish a regulatory framework aimed at safeguarding consumers by setting standards for tow-truck operators. Mr Bheki Cele, the Minister of Police at the time, highlighted the national scale of the problem during a November 2019 parliamentary meeting, citing

"Until we have a regulated industry, with rules and regulations in place and consumer protection law, the troubling trend of gang involvement, leading to instances of intimidation and violence within the industry will continue." - Etienne Pel (UTASA).

criminal activities associated with tow-truck operators, including vehicle theft, scrapping and involvement in drug syndicates (Dolley, 2022).

Etienne Pel, the national chairman of the UTASA, expressed concerns regarding the territorial attitudes prevalent among many towing companies. He noted the troubling trend of gang involvement, leading to instances of intimidation and violence within the industry. Mr Pel stressed that these challenges were not isolated to specific regions but rather occurred nationwide. He also highlighted the over-saturation of the towing industry, attributing it to its considerable profitability. Mr Pel accentuated the urgent need for industry regulation, including the implementation of comprehensive rules, consumer protection laws and government enforcement. "Until we have a regulated industry, with rules and regulations in place and consumer protection law, such issues will continue. Without the support of government enforcement and regulation it is difficult because at the moment, anyone with a driving licence or PDP is able to enter the industry. We want some standards in place and towing operators with corporate governance," he said (Charles, 2015.)

The Gauteng authorities have previously declared their intent to strengthen control over the towing sector. In 2018, it emerged that amendments to the Gauteng Provincial Road Traffic Act were in progress to enhance industry regulation. A statement linked to the Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport highlighted: "In the absence of an effective regulatory system, allegations of misconduct against tow-truck operators have increased." These reports encompass allegations such as bribing police members to gain early notification of road crashes, endorsing panel-beaters who offer commissions to towing staff, engaging in reckless driving and imposing exorbitant towing fees (Dolley, 2022).

"Unfortunately, due to the industry not yet being regulated, there are operators who take advantage of the vulnerability of drivers. The National Department of Transport is in the process of reviewing current draft legislation for the regulating of the tow-truck industry," Mr Pel noted (Nganga, 2022).



As initial responders, proficient and greatly passionate about their trade, tow-truck drivers are often unfairly criticised, despite being invaluable during moments of vulnerability. However, a handful of corrupt individuals engage in turf conflicts, extortion and even murder, tarnishing the reputation of the entire industry. Although "tow-truck turf wars" sounds like something out of an action movie, it is real and the gangsters involved in these turf wars pose a significant threat. Perhaps with industry regulation, there is a chance for change, but this is not guaranteed - as is evident with the violence in the taxi industry. While regulation can be a tool for improvement, it is crucial to consider its effectiveness and potential limitations in addressing complex issues within an industry - including the towing industry.

## Editor's note

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# List of references



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