

# Zimbabwe: Artisanal Gold Mining and Violence. The Case of Midlands Province, 2017–2026

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to unpack the nuances of violence in Zimbabwe’s artisanal gold mining sector and how it impacts the wider community. Drawing on data gathered from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews, the findings indicate that violence in the artisanal gold mining sector is primarily sustained by economic exclusion, a weak regulatory environment, and corrupt security arrangements. To this end, the study utilizes the rational choice model to demonstrate how situational cost–benefit calculations shape the choices of militant actors seeking to profit aggressively from chaos, leading to an upsurge in violence in the gold sector. In this regard, the study argues that economic exclusion and weak regulation create profitable opportunities that are protected by corrupt local security arrangements, resulting in violence, lawlessness, and instability across Zimbabwe’s Midlands gold mining sector. Given the multisectoral nature of this violence, the research concludes by recommending measures aimed at stabilizing the mining sector, thereby diffusing artisanal mining violence.

**Keywords:** Artisanal gold mining violence, Midlands province, rational choice model, border porosity, Zimbabwe.

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## **Introduction**

Zimbabwe grapples with escalating violent attacks targeting its lucrative gold mining industry, which underpins the broader economy through export earnings (accounting for at least 60%) and employment creation (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2020). The gold mining industry is thus a critical pillar of the national economy, contributing significantly to government revenue and fostering linkages with other key sectors (Zimbabwe Miners Federation, 2022). However, the escalating violence poses grave threats to the industry's viability and to Zimbabwe's socio-economic recovery efforts, which heavily rely on the growth of the mining sector. Persistent armed attacks have disrupted production and revenue flows, jeopardized the safety of workers and nearby communities, and eroded investor confidence in the sector (International Crisis Group, 2020). The epicenter of the violence is Zimbabwe's Midlands Province, which hosts over 50% of large-scale gold mines but has paradoxically transformed into a hotbed of mining-related violence, posing complex security, economic, and human rights challenges. As observed by Mkodzongi (2020), "Parts of Zimbabwe's gold mining heartland have become violent, lawless territories controlled by gangs that wield machetes with impunity" (p. 1481).

While factors such as unemployment, porous borders, and ineffective policing have been linked to the crisis, most analyses rely on disjointed insights from sporadic media reporting that fail to unravel the systemic drivers sustaining the tide of violence that threatens citizens, undermines mining investments, and retards national economic progress (International Crisis Group, 2020). This constitutes a critical knowledge gap, which this research seeks to address by offering in-depth academic insights into the intersection of economic grievances, regulatory deficiencies, and political incentives driving the evolution of sporadic artisanal mining violence into formidable, cartel-driven violence affecting Zimbabwe's Midlands goldfields. The study, therefore, goes beyond fragmented commentary to expose the root causes, shadowy networks, and vested interests underpinning mining-related violence. The central argument of the research is that economic exclusion, coupled with a frail regulatory framework, not only causes but also sustains artisanal mining violence across the Midlands goldfields.

The Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is particularly effective in explaining artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands province due to its emphasis on the strategic decision-making processes of individuals involved in mining conflicts. This theory posits that actors, such as artisanal miners and state agents, engage in violence based on a calculated assessment of risks and rewards, which aligns with findings that competition between these groups significantly contributes to conflict dynamics (Rigterink et al., 2024). Furthermore, it incorporates elements of deterrence, suggesting that the perceived consequences of violence can deter or provoke conflict, thus providing a nuanced understanding of the motivations behind violent actions in the artisanal mining sector (Brown et al., 2010). This multifaceted approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of the local context and the agency of miners, rendering it a superior explanatory model in this setting.

Therefore, through the utility of the RCT, the study posits that economic exclusion and a fragile regulatory framework provide ample opportunities for violence and lawlessness to manifest in the Midlands. Economic exclusion and weak regulation significantly impact artisanal mining communities, leading to widespread violence. Artisanal gold mining, while providing essential livelihoods amidst economic decline, often results in severe economic disparities among various social groups. The local community members, particularly women and youth, are usually sidelined by external mining syndicates that exploit their domestic mineral wealth, forcing them to resort to violence as a bargaining instrument. Likewise, the lack of formalization and regulatory frameworks exacerbates these issues, as corrupt security arrangements fronted by security operatives, politicians, environmental officials, and members of the judiciary further exploit the regulatory laxity for personal gain, leading to further violence.

This study focused on the phase beginning in 2017, marked by the evolution of machete gangs into ruthless criminal syndicates attacking citizens and mining infrastructure with impunity. This escalation had been linked to socio-economic deterioration, regulatory lapses, and security deficiencies that had failed to decisively contain previously isolated attacks, especially in the post-2017 period. This evolution signaled uniquely complex dynamics compared to previous episodic violence. Evidence from the current escalatory period exposed dire economic exclusion, regulatory loopholes, and collusion with security organs, catalyzing the amplified threats (Navaya, 2021).

The Midlands province was selected as the case study because it is the epicenter of violent, illicit gold activities. The Midlands gold fields serve as an information-rich case study for examining a range of factors, including youth disenfranchisement, state security deficiencies, and the underlying regulatory weaknesses that continue to propel the crisis despite attempted crackdowns. Findings from the Midlands gold mining region provide empirically grounded insights to guide legislative amendments and socio-economic interventions tailored to local realities necessary for de-escalating violence and promoting sustainable mining practices (International Crisis Group, 2020). Stemming the tide of violence is, therefore, an economic and security imperative to restore stability, safeguard jobs and livelihoods, and enable the mining industry to spearhead broader national development plans. More so, conducting rigorous academic research to investigate the underlying triggers sustaining mining violence is crucial for generating empirically grounded insights that are necessary to inform evidence-based policies and practical interventions. The research is categorized into five broad sections, excluding the introduction. The methodology and literature review form the first and second segments, respectively. The theoretical framework forms the third part, followed by the findings section. The fifth and final segment consists of the discussion portion before a brief conclusion.

## **Methodology**

This study examines the dynamics of artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands province from 2017 to 2026. The study was guided by three research questions. That is: 1) what are the drivers of the violence disrupting Zimbabwe's artisanal gold mining sector? What are the effects of artisanal mining-related violence? What are the possible measures to curb the violence and criminality? An exploratory qualitative instrumental case study design was adopted. It facilitates a flexible yet focused data gathering approach from multiple angles encompassing affected industrial mining representatives, artisanal gold panners in surrounding open fields, security commanders attempting crackdowns, and oversight administrators coordinating containment. A sample size of 33 participants was interviewed in the study. A purposive sampling technique was also applied to identify the most appropriate informants. The goal is to include information-rich cases from each of the key stakeholder categories. These key informants included eight members of staff from affected large-scale mines, ten unregistered artisanal miners, five state security operatives, five displaced former mining community residents, and five civil society advocates. This gathering of informants allowed for robust data collection from key stakeholder perspectives without risking data redundancy.

The primary sampling scope for the research encompassed accessible large mine facilities, enforcement command centers, and oversight coordination offices across 3 violence-riven Midlands districts of Shurugwi, Kwekwe, and Zvishavane. Recent police and media monitoring suggest these areas continue to experience intensified raids, infrastructure sabotage, and gang violence compared to other localities. The study utilised three main sources of primary data: interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and direct observation by the researchers who had been actively involved in studying this issue. Academic journal articles, official mining industry reports, policy documents, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) reports, and other published literature were reviewed to gather background information and contextualise the collected primary data.

The in-depth key informant interviews involved extensive in-person engagements with seven security commanders, administrators, and mining managers, leveraging purposive expert sampling. Four FGDs with eight participants each, particularly with collectives of artisanal miners in hotspot communities, security personnel, large-scale mine workers, and affected community members. Each of the four FGDs lasted 2 hours to reveal motives, drivers, and protection outlooks. Direct observations involved several observational visits across attacked mining plants and residential areas to enable site assessments regarding vulnerabilities, effects of violence, and protection mechanisms employed. Last but not least, researchers also acted as instruments, given their active long-term involvement in studying mining violence. Their insights and perspectives thus served as valuable sources of primary data.

## **Literature Review**

Contemporary empirical studies investigating escalatory artisanal mining conflicts across mineral-rich African countries provide useful comparative insights contextualizing the evolution of Zimbabwe's current gang violence crisis besieging lucrative gold mining regions. Assessments expose illicit smuggling networks, politicization risks, and oversight deficiencies, enabling unrest. However, perspectives explicitly focused on Zimbabwe's unrest remain quite limited, signaling important knowledge gaps this study seeks to address.

An expanding interdisciplinary literature explores links between informal artisanal mining, illicit cross-border smuggling channels, and outbreaks of violent micro-conflicts in mineral-rich African locales ranging from the Sahel to the Great Lakes region (McQuilken & Hilson, 2022). Studies focused on the Sahel and Central Africa trace illicit financing pathways whereby artisanally mined gold is smuggled across porous borders, bypassing state buyers, providing off-book rents supporting the sustainability of militias and terrorist cells like ISIS-affiliates, even motivating violent territorial seizures of mining areas (Pásztor, 2024).

Studies demonstrate informal panning often catalyzes clan clashes and armed group incursions in countries like Mali, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where oversight is minimal. The enforcement gaps and untraceable

contraband lucrateness sustains cycles of micro-conflicts across mineral-rich regions. Where states lack capacity demarcating regulatory frameworks, clashes frequently erupt over contested mining access rights (Wagner & Hunter, 2020). Empirical assessments globally concur that inadequate oversight and factional state interests can incentivize opportunistic use of violence to access resource rents and mining infrastructure (Auty & Furlonge, 2019; Ogwang et al., 2019).

On a similar note, there is also literature highlighting how high-value mineral reserves catalyze violence by making anticipated payoffs from illegal extractive activities appear lucrative enough to outweigh risks of confrontations, arrests, or deaths for economic underclasses (Berman et al., 2017). This literature concurs with the RCT that strained regulatory and economic circumstances incentivize criminals to evaluate mineral looting to discount threats when outsized profits beckon. This literature is critical for this study as it provides contextual evidence which sheds light in understanding Midlands gold mining violence. As a point of departure, this study further probes the RCT, especially how it can be utilized to disincentivize violence.

Scholars further observe pronounced risks of unrest where surging informal artisanal mining remains unchecked by inadequate formalization and oversight mechanisms but is actively encouraged by local political leaders seeking electoral support of licensing authority patronage (Hilson et al., 2022). These governance complexities abound in countries like Ghana and Zambia's Copperbelt, where politicians have mobilized exploitative patron-client networks around artisanal gold mining, catalyzing violent clashes over contested

sites and claims amid deficient national regulatory frameworks unable to effectively govern rapid informalization. Where mineral wealth activation proceeds in the absence of state stewardship, risks of unrest escalate.

Additionally, research focused on East Africa demonstrates that overlooking artisanal mining in policy reforms focused narrowly on large-scale industrial growth risks exacerbating precarious livelihood insecurity for marginalized mining-dependent populations, heightening grievances (Bryceson & Geenen, 2016). Studies across Africa also highlight how burgeoning cohorts of unemployed youth in resource-rich but economically stagnant states become critical drivers of disruptive mining-related unrest based on perceived injustices blocking prosperity (Sarfo-Mensah, Adjaloo, & Donkor, 2009). Likewise, this study demonstrates how economic exclusion of the youth encourages them to risk their lives, health, and well-being by resorting to violence in order to gain access to lucrative Midlands gold fields.

Investigations assessing impacts of unrelenting artisanal mining violence in locales across Africa also expose resulting socioeconomic disruptions, including internal displacement as communities flee insecurity, loss of agricultural livelihoods and revenue due to coerced mining labor regimes, human rights abuses by trafficking networks, including child conscription, and proliferation of banditry targeting citizens under cover of chaos (Amnesty International, 2020). Studies focused on crisis regions like eastern DRC further trace devastating impacts whereby continued violence and community safety fears have led to the collapse of essential basic services like healthcare and education across mining centers (Bafilemba & Lezhnev, 2015).

Evidence spotlights that beyond direct casualties, unrelenting unrest creates a climate of fear undermining wider prosperity.

These empirical cases provide convenient comparative insights for contextualizing Zimbabwe's contemporary eruption of decentralized mining violence emanating from economic marginalization, fragile policy frameworks, and corrupt local security provisions. They demonstrate wider conflict risks stemming from artisanal mining exclusion and criminalization. However, perspectives focused explicitly on examining Zimbabwe's mining violence drivers, networks of state-gang collusion, and policy complexities enabling the crisis remain quite limited. Additionally, coverage of impacts has focused predominantly on production losses rather than wider societal effects on displaced communities and the collapse of basic services, signaling an important evidence gap addressed in this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study deploys the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) of economics, first propounded by Adam Smith, to articulate the underlying factors behind artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe (Dowding, 2011). Through the utility of the RCT, the study posits that economic exclusion, compounded by a fragile regulatory framework, engenders lucrative

prospects that are sheltered by corrupt local security arrangements. Although there are numerous theories that can be used in explaining artisanal mining violence, such as political economy, state fragility, violent entrepreneurship, or hybrid governance, these theories do not fully capture the dynamics of artisanal mining violence in the Midlands (Cohn & Hira, 2020; Ferreira, 2017; Makadok & Coff, 2009; Volkov, 2002). That is, while these frameworks highlight the interplay between economic conditions and state dynamics, they tend to overlook the nuanced relationships among local actors and the informal networks that govern artisanal mining activities, as evidenced by the flexible bargains between new political actors and the state (Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023).

Additionally, the focus on militarized interventions and environmental concerns fails to address the socio-economic realities that drive individuals towards artisanal mining, which is often a response to unemployment and economic decline (Ofosu et al., 2024).

The RCT, however, provides a more comprehensive understanding by emphasizing individual decision-making processes influenced by competition and resource availability, thereby elucidating the motivations behind violent conflicts between artisanal and industrial miners (Rigterink et al., 2024). This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the strategic choices made by miners in response to both local and broader economic pressures, ultimately offering a clearer lens through which to analyze the violence associated with artisanal mining in Zimbabwe (Mawowa, 2013).

The RCT provides three key variables that articulate the nuances of artisanal mining violence. These are: 1) high benefits vs. low costs; 2) impunity and collusion; and 3) resource capture. Regarding high benefits vs. low costs, artisanal miners in the Midlands engage in violent competition because the rewards, such as high-grade gold deposits, are immediate and significant. For instance, one can get US\$700 for 10 grams of gold ore, which is more than what most working Zimbabweans earn each month (FGD with illegal miners, Shurugwi, personal communication, 19 February, 2023). Furthermore, the cost of violent attacks, detention, or death is often perceived as lower than the cost of poverty or starvation. Likewise, the assurance of impunity emanating from corrupt local security collusion removes the perceived negative consequences whilst reinforcing the allure of violent behavior. Last but not least, violence is used as a strategic tool to seize lucrative mining claims or pilfer processed ore from others, a rational tactic to maximize output with minimum labor.

Weak regulatory frameworks and corrupt local security arrangements significantly contribute to the persistence of violent artisanal mining practices in the Midlands. Zimbabwe's socio-economic crisis has led to a surge in illegal mining, with approximately 400,000 miners operating without oversight, particularly in districts like Kwekwe, Shurugwi, and Mberengwa, where mining-related violence is rampant (Mwatwara et al., 2022). Corruption within the security sector, particularly involving the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), has exacerbated this issue, as security forces collude with informal miners and black-market dealers, prioritizing personal gain over public

welfare (Saunders, 2016; Maringira & Masiya, 2016). This dynamic not only facilitates the exploitation of resources but also undermines efforts for democratic governance, as profits from mining are funneled to sustain political elites, further entrenching corruption and violence in the mining sector (Saunders, 2014; Mawowa, 2013).

This pursuit of personal interests by both state and non-state actors operating within the artisanal mining sector has colloquially been referred to as the ‘goat mentality’. The term is rooted in Zimbabwe’s Shona proverb: *mbudzi inodya payakasungirirwa* meaning, “a goat browses where it is tied”. Just as a goat will eat anything to survive, artisanal miners often operate in defunct, unsafe, or illegal shafts without protective equipment because their focus is solely on immediate monetary gain. The ‘goat mentality’ therefore succinctly captures how entitlement through proximity justifies personal aggrandizement within the artisanal mining sector, just as a tied goat feels entitled to eat anything within its reach (Maringira & Masiya, 2016). The ‘goat mentality’ has thus been used to describe how state actors, particularly security sector operatives, violently abuse their access to mineral-rich regions for personal enrichment. This local conceptualization of the nuances of artisanal mining violence through the ‘goat mentality’ dovetails well with the RCT.

The integration of RCT and the ‘goat mentality’ concept offers a nuanced framework for understanding artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe’s Midlands province. The RCT posits that individuals act based on self-interest, which aligns with the motivations of artisanal miners and state security personnel who engage in violence to secure resources and personal gain (Malešević, 2022). On the other hand, the ‘goat mentality’ reflects a mindset among security forces, where state agents exploit public resources for personal enrichment, exacerbating tensions with artisanal miners (Maringira & Masiya, 2016). Additionally, competition between artisanal and industrial miners fuels conflict, as economic pressures and resource scarcity lead to violent confrontations (Rigterink et al., 2024). The exploitative labor relations within the artisanal mining sector further complicate this dynamic, as vulnerable miners face violence from both criminal gangs and state actors, highlighting the intersection of economic motivations and systemic inequalities (Mkodzongi, 2021). Thus, this integrated approach elucidates the multifaceted causes of violence in Zimbabwe’s artisanal mining landscape.

Therefore, the RCT explains artisanal mining violence not as irrational chaos, but as a deliberate, goal-oriented strategy where actors weigh the costs and benefits of using violence to secure economic gain. In the context of artisanal gold mining, violence is a tool used by individuals, syndicates, and gangs to control territory, loot resources, and enforce local order. The cost-benefit calculations of individuals involved in artisanal mining violence are influenced by several interrelated factors, including competition between artisanal and industrial miners, economic incentives, and the socio-political context. Competition for resources often leads to violent conflict, particularly in the Midlands, where artisanal gold mining is feasible alongside industrial operations, as evidenced by the significant impact of price shocks on violence in these areas (Rigterink et al., 2023, 2024).

Additionally, illegal armed groups may exploit artisanal mining for direct financial gain, either by controlling mining operations or through extortion, which creates a direct incentive for violence (Rettberg & Riomalo, 2014). The presence of large youth populations can also exacerbate tensions, as economic grievances linked to fluctuating mineral prices may lower opportunity costs for young individuals, increasing their likelihood of engaging in conflict (Belhaine, 2018). Furthermore, the informal trading networks surrounding artisanal mining often evade regulatory frameworks, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability (Chirico & Malpeli, 2014). Collectively, these factors create a complex landscape where the potential for profit often outweighs the risks associated with violent behavior. In this context, rational choice perspectives focusing on situational cost-benefit calculations shaping decisions by armed groups to violently profit from disruptions provide enhanced utility in explaining Zimbabwe's upsurge in gold sector violence. Where state efficacy lapses create a low-risk ecosystem for forcibly targeting mining assets (Berman et al., 2017).

However, the RCT can also be applied to develop effective interventions aimed at reducing violence associated with artisanal mining by altering the cost-benefit calculations of individuals involved. By understanding that individuals engage in violence when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs, policymakers can implement strategies that increase the risks and decrease the rewards of such actions.

## **Findings**

### ***Key drivers of artisanal mining violence in the Midlands province***

This segment draws upon empirical findings obtained through in-depth fieldwork investigations conducted in volatile gold mining areas across the Midlands between October 2024 and March 2025. It was guided by the first research question. The drivers of mining violence resonate with the RCT, whereby the perceived benefits associated with artisanal mining violence outweigh the apparent risks. In this regard, the main argument proposed by the study is that artisanal mining violence in the Midlands persists because economic exclusion and weak regulation create profitable opportunities that are protected by corrupt local security arrangements.

The assumptions of the RCT align with the behaviors of artisanal miners in Zimbabwe's Midlands province, as these miners often make decisions based on perceived economic benefits and the costs associated with violence. Artisanal mining has become a crucial economic activity, providing livelihoods amidst political instability, which influences miners to engage in competitive behaviors that can lead to violence (Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023; Rigterink et al., 2024). The decision to resort to violence can be seen as a rational choice when miners believe that such actions will secure their economic interests, especially in a context where mineral values are high and competition is fierce (Bond et al., 2013; Malešević, 2022).

Participant narratives across all stakeholder categories consistently underscored interrelated economic deprivation factors, governance lapses, and illicit opportunism coalescing to escalate mining-linked violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands region in the post-2017 period. Several security commanders and civil society representatives attributed appeal of illegal gold panning and mine robberies to lucrative returns from Zimbabwe's abundant gold resources amidst a climate of economic hardship, hyperinflation, and joblessness over recent years. This observation also concurs with the RCT, whereby economic challenges make the option of enrolling in artisanal mining more appealing. One retired police superintendent based in Kwekwe remarked:

*These machete gangs engage in brutal violence precisely because our mineral wealth is so enticing and lucrative to impoverished youths when the formal economy is essentially collapsed. Gold is easy money, or at least perceived as such, so they want it by any means necessary* (personal communication, retired Police superintendent, Kwekwe, 20 November, 2024).

Therefore, overlapping endemic youth unemployment exceeding 80% nationally alongside acute economic deprivation exacerbate cost-benefit outlooks framing illegal mining as a compelling, high-risk, high-reward income source worth risking bloodshed to access. This resonated with perspectives from illicit gold panners themselves operating along Shurugwi mining tracts, who cited financial desperation fueling criminal risk-taking:

*With no money coming in from real jobs, we have to resort to panning for gold illegally to eat and survive nowadays. We risk police harassment and gang beatings to access these riches because the rewards make those dangers seem worthwhile, so then we become violent ourselves to protect our livelihoods* (FGD with illegal gold panners, Shurugwi, 22 December, 2024).

Socio-economic grievances stemming from endemic poverty and surging joblessness are frequently cited as channeling restless youth demographics into illegal mining enterprises, stoking cycles of violence. That is, youth unemployment has risen to alarming levels exceeding 80% nationally by 2025 (Hove & Chenzi, 2024). One community advocate in Shurugwi lamented how the lack of viable livelihood alternatives pushed destitute youths toward lawless solutions:

*It's heartbreaking seeing young men who should be productive members of society feeling they have no choice but to wield machetes to make ends meet through illegal mining. Where reputable jobs are totally unavailable, disruptive violence can seem like the only path out of destitution, even martyrdom* (personal communication, Community Advocate, Shurugwi, 10 January, 2025).

Affected mining representatives concurred, with one operations manager observing their mining facility faced perpetual threats precisely because:

*We are surrounded by economically disenfranchised youth populations without access to formal employment, but aware of our underground mineral riches. Our*

*fences alone cannot stop their desperate intrusions* (personal communication, Mining Operations Manager, Gweru, 27 February, 2025).

Scholars concur that Zimbabwe's economic exclusion, especially in the post-2017 period, increased the chances of violent risk-taking, especially among the youth. Mkodzongi (2020) 1487), for instance, stated that "Under a neoliberalizing state, the youths, who historically enjoyed access to resource rents under the indigenization regulations, have been dis-empowered and marginalized in favor of an emerging comparator bourgeois representing foreign mining interests – increasingly dominated by the Chinese...However, the youths have not been passive victims of this state-sponsored onslaught; they have organized themselves into syndicates, arming themselves with machetes and other blunt instruments – as a way of resisting evictions" (p. 1487).

Accordingly, the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) also commented on how youth unemployment incentivizes artisanal gold mining violence in Kwekwe:

*The idea is to create a vulnerable community that can be exploited, and artisanal miners are just the perfect constituency for that and this is one of the reasons why, upon assuming power [in 2017], President Mnangagwa liberalized artisanal miners and relaxed the licence requirements. What this meant was that the majority of unemployed young people could now easily find their way into the tunnels to extract the precious gold. But of course, it came at a price. The fact that most young people are unemployed creates a willing demographic that will do whatever to get a meal on the table... (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2022).*

However, while economic motivations are significant, they do not fully account for the complexities of violence, as social inequalities and emotional factors also play a critical role in shaping these decisions (Malešević, 2022; Winstok, 2013). Thus, understanding violence in this context requires a nuanced approach that considers both rational economic calculations and the broader socio-political dynamics at play, particularly a weak regulatory system that creates vested profitable opportunities fortified by corrupt local security arrangements.

The proliferation of unregulated artisanal gold miners through legal and administrative policy loopholes encourages conflicts destabilizing the Midlands province. Security agents recounted how ineffective mining licensing procedures enabled migrant panners to establish extensive operations in open tracts bordering industrial reserves, which then persistently clash with official entities. A senior police officer stationed in the Midlands' Kwekwe district stated:

*We are completely overwhelmed trying to control the spread of these illegal panners mining gold without licences or oversight. They set up illegal mills and operations overnight along the borders of industrial mines, leading to bloody raids and counter-raids as both sides fight over the riches* (personal communication, Police Commander, Kwekwe, 3 March 2025).

Mining managers echoed similar sentiments, with one operations director describing surrounding informal panning as “A porous labyrinth eroding our exclusivity with hordes brazenly extracting ore then smuggling it out before we can act, so clashes are inevitable in the mineral scramble” (personal communication, Mining Operations Director, Shurugwi, 18 January, 2025).

Compounding informal expansion are criticisms from multiple stakeholders regarding antiquated mining licensing policies and related legislation unable to constructively accommodate Zimbabwe’s soaring illegal artisanal gold panning sector. Both security operatives and community representatives cited dysfunctional bureaucratic procedures, overly focused on industrial capital rather than progressive reforms, and integrating disruptive illegal laborers as a core unrest catalyst.

*The artisanal mining crisis we face begins with our licensing and legal regime stuck decades behind the realities on the ground. No economic alternatives are provided to absorb these armies of desperate illegal panners, so they fight the system, disrupting industrialists, which should be the backbone of our economy* (personal communication, Civil Society Advocate, Harare, 21 November, 2024).

Likewise, a police officer from Gweru also echoed similar sentiments that:

*Formalization of these artisanal miners operating outside regulated boundaries has stalled for ages under outdated mining acts catering only to big capital rather than workers’ needs. So those excluded resort to violence, occupying any space, fueling endless cycles of violence* (personal communication, Police Officer, Gweru, 12 December, 2022).

The Mines and Minerals Act of 1961 (MMA), for instance, is archaic and has become difficult to unify with policies meant to stimulate growth within the mining industry and advance the nation socio-economically. The MMA has also contributed to violence since it prescribes that mining surpasses all other land uses, including agriculture and settlement. As a result, matters of environmental degradation, expulsion of residents, or damage to their farms and grazing lands by miners, including illegal ones, become secondary as long as mining interests are safeguarded (Ncube, 2021).

Another pivotal factor enabling emboldened gold mining violence cited across stakeholder groups was perceived deficient policing capacity and integrity compromised by alleged collusion between security forces and criminal gangs. Civil society advocates slammed militarized security responses as haphazard, undermined by factionalism and suspected criminal collusion networks:

*While the government tries projecting martial toughness by deploying soldiers to hotspots, everyone knows elements within the security forces are compromised and collaborating with machete gangs. So the so-called containment only enriches corrupt enforcers perpetuating militarized chaos* (personal communication, Civil Society Advocate, Harare, 5 March, 2025).

Residents displaced by unrest similarly decried how:

*Our own police are paid off by these violent syndicates to turn a blind eye while they terrorize communities. We cannot rely on protectors who actively embolden criminal militias in our mining areas* (FGD with displaced residents, Kwekwe, 28 January, 2025).

Artisanal panners went further, alleging direct exploitation by bribed security details:

*Rather than making us safer, the police and soldiers frequently arrive only to extort illegal miners, demanding portions of our underground ore stashes. We comply out of fear since they collaborate with machete gangs to loot and assault anyone who resists their corrupt shakedowns* (FGD with illegal miners, Shurugwi, 19 February 2023).

Within security ranks themselves, some operatives acknowledged graft undermining enforcement integrity, though framing it as infiltration rather than systemic failings:

*It's true that under-resourced units have allowed criminal elements to infiltrate our structures, who betray mandates through collusion with machete militias controlling illicit gold flows. However, such corruption implicates a few rogue individuals rather than the institutions themselves* (personal communication, Senior Police Official, Harare, 28 February, 2025).

These testimonies are also corroborated by media reports. For instance, Thomas Admire Mwale, a Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) soldier stationed in Kwekwe district at 5 Infantry Brigade, was arrested together with seven illegal gold miners on robbery charges. A report on Zimbabwe's election milieu also confirms the presence and active involvement of state agents in artisanal gold mining violence by stating that:

*... we came across numerous reports of alleged involvement of serving and former state security personnel from the police, military, and intelligence in the shadow hierarchy and membership of these gangs, which all serve to confirm that the violence is unmistakably an organised crime...* (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2023, p. 7).

This involvement of security sector operatives resonates with the 'goat mentality' and is strongly related to Zimbabwe's deepening economic crisis, pulling in state actors, especially members of the security services.

### ***Effects of mining-related violence in the Midlands province***

This segment focuses on the second research question, and it argues that coverage of impacts of artisanal mining-related violence in Zimbabwe has focused predominantly on production losses rather than wider societal effects on displaced communities and the collapse of basic services, signaling an important evidence gap. Inasmuch as the RCT

has been utilised in unpacking the underlying drivers of artisanal gold mining violence, it can also be applied in understanding its implications. The RCT framework elucidates the negative effects of artisanal mining violence on local communities in Zimbabwe's Midlands province by highlighting the strategic decisions made by individuals and groups in response to economic incentives and disincentives.

Artisanal mining, while providing essential livelihoods, often leads to environmental degradation and social unrest, as miners prioritize immediate economic gains over long-term sustainability, resulting in significant ecological damage and health issues for communities (Nyakuwanika & Panicker, 2025). Furthermore, economic shocks in the artisanal sector can trigger increased violence, as armed groups exploit these conditions to exert control and extract resources, leading to violence against civilians (Laurent-Lucchetti et al., 2024). The dynamics of gender also play a crucial role, as women disproportionately bear the brunt of violence and conflict, often exacerbated by the lawlessness perpetuated by external armed groups (Ngwenya et al., 2024).

This interplay of economic motivations, compromised security structures, and violence illustrates how rational choices, influenced by immediate economic pressures, can lead to detrimental outcomes for local communities (Huggins, 2016; Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023).

Hence, beyond production disruptions and lost export revenues, participant narratives illuminated how persistent criminality and violence besieging gold mining areas catalyzed devastating spillover effects on surrounding towns and villages across Midlands province. Rippling economic dislocations, collapsed social services, and climates of fear fueling internal displacement emerged as recurrent themes. According to residents and community groups, reverberating impacts from unabated illegal mining conflicts progressively eroded economic stability across peripheral population centers and informal sectors reliant on earnings derived from legitimate mining activities. One youth representative in Kwekwe described how:

*Our district's entire underground economy of vegetable vendors, equipment suppliers, transporters, and artisans dependent on the gold mines has unraveled thanks to non-stop invasions, shuttering operations, and destroying work opportunities (personal communication, Youth Advocate, Kwekwe, 19 January, 2025).*

Ngwenya et al. (2024) also postulate that artisanal mining violence significantly impacts informal economies in the Midlands region, exacerbating socio-economic challenges and community dynamics.

Testimonies further illuminated crippling losses undermining mining agglomeration linkages vital for diversified growth:

*Beyond just extractives roles, entire secondary industries like machinery fabrication and maintenance have downsized significantly through lacking contracts from flagship mines forced into hibernation amidst machete warfare. Knock-on supply chain disruptions have been economically catastrophic for industrializing*

*communities* (personal communication, Mining Operations Manager, Gweru, 22 February, 2025).

The Centre for Natural Resource Governance (2024) also stated that violence causes a significant revenue leakage for the Zimbabwean government at a time when the gold sector is a crucial component of the country's economic recovery strategy. Likewise, Shoko (2020) stressed that Zimbabwe loses US\$ 100 million worth of gold through leakages from the mining syndicates responsible for the violence and smuggling.

Another shattering outcome from criminality blighting mining zones was the hollowing out of public services, including healthcare and education, according to residents displaced from affected areas.

*Our villages near the mines effectively lost all basic services amid unrelenting lawlessness and mayhem, which eventually forced clinics and schools to simply shut down, not from lack of funding but fears over staff safety under constant threats* (personal communication, Community Elder, Shurugwi, 5 March, 2025).

The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2023) concurs that the haphazard manner in which artisanal gold mining is carried out wherever gold has been identified in considerable amounts has no regard for people's homes, roads, fields, or public infrastructure. In this regard, teachers from Kwekwe also echoed similar sentiments that:

*Every time you enter formerly thriving settlements near gold operations, you encounter gutted buildings with broken windows having once served as schools or clinics, deserted due to colleagues fleeing brutality regularly inflicted by machete militias controlling those areas with impunity from authorities* (FGD with teachers, Kwekwe, 14 February, 2025).

Civil society groups quantified these declines in their districts of operation, with one report detailing how, "23% of primary schools, 48% of secondary schools and 61% of state health facilities had outright closed between 2019 and 2024 while remaining services limped on with acute staff shortages lowering quality" (personal communication, Civil Society Researcher, Gweru, 11 March, 2025).

Scholarly reports further agree that the violence associated with mining activities has resulted in severe human rights violations, including the destruction of homes and schools (Ngwenya et al., 2024). Furthermore, the presence of armed groups intensifies insecurity, leading to violent deaths and a pervasive atmosphere of fear (Hove et al., 2014; Ngwenya et al., 2024).

The most far-reaching consequence illuminated by affected residents themselves is endemic displacement triggered by pervasive fear and insecurity afflicting communities proximate to embattled gold precincts transformed into warzone-like environments. One civil society-led monitoring population movements quantified chilling statistics highlighting Zimbabwe's burgeoning internal displacement crisis, driven predominantly by extractive

violence concentrated in the Midlands province, alleged that:

*Over 37,000 persons originating from Midlands mining areas were displaced through mid-2022, seeking refuge in neighboring districts or informal camps around major towns like Kwekwe following systematic forced evictions by machete gangs (personal communication, Displacement Data Coordinator, Harare, 6 March, 2025).*

Mandishekwa (2024) also stresses that displacement frequently leads to landlessness and social disarticulation as rural families lose their primary productive assets, which exacerbates their vulnerability to poverty.

## **Discussion**

### *Measures to curb artisanal mining-based violence and criminality*

The discussion section subsequently situates empirical insights within the study's conceptual framework, rooted in the economic theory of rational choice, which exemplifies criminal opportunism around mineral wealth (Berman et al., 2017). It is apparent that corrupt local security arrangements significantly contribute to the perpetuation of artisanal mining violence in the Midlands by intertwining state power with resource exploitation, leading to a cycle of violence and impunity. The security sector, closely aligned with the ruling ZANU-PF, has been implicated in the violent enforcement of control over artisanal mining activities, often prioritizing personal gain over public welfare (Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023; Maringira & Masiya, 2016). This 'goat mentality' fosters an environment where security personnel engage in corrupt practices, including extortion and violence against miners, thereby exacerbating local tensions and undermining community safety (Maringira & Masiya, 2016; Masiya, 2023). Hence, a multifaceted approach that combines deterrence with socio-economic support is essential for effectively reducing artisanal mining violence.

The RCT can be used as an instrument to gauge and increase the risk of undertaking in artisanal gold mining violence. Therefore, the RCT can be used in identifying possible areas where risk can be increased to outweigh the lure of participating in violent behaviour thereby fostering peace. For instance, enhancing law enforcement presence and improving community security can raise the perceived costs of engaging in violence (Bray, 2009). Mwatwara et al. (2022) also argued that the low presence or absence of local security in Midlands province's volatile gold mining regions has incentivised violent behaviour.

Likewise, providing economic alternatives and support for conflict resolution can diminish the perceived benefits of violent behaviour (Laurent-Lucchetti et al., 2024). Zimbabwe's dire economic milieu is one of the major underlying influences that increases the prospects of participating in violent behaviour in the mining sector. Therefore, opening other economic avenues eases the pressure on the artisanal mining sector, thus reducing violent behaviour.

Additionally, addressing underlying economic shocks that lead to violence, as highlighted in the context of artisanal mining, can mitigate the triggers of violence (Laurent-Lucchetti et al., 2024). This requires a holistic approach that moves beyond security crackdowns to focus on formalization, economic diversification, and structural reform. The violence is largely a product of class struggle, involving desperate, economically disenfranchised youth competing for resources against elite-controlled networks, exacerbated by the search for economic respite amidst hyperinflation and agricultural decline caused by climate change (Mkodzongi, 2020).

Furthermore, fostering a culture of integrity and accountability within mining operations can reduce the social acceptance of violence, thereby influencing individual decision-making processes (Cabrera, 2025). The current normalization of violence in the Midlands is primarily driven by informality, patronage, and weak governance, which allow illegal, violent actors to dominate gold-rush sites. Hence, fostering a culture of integrity and accountability within mining operations has the capability of reshaping social values and ending the culture of impunity, thereby rebuilding public trust in the compromised security architecture.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, gold mining sector violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands province continues to be a national security challenge. Zimbabwe's current economic situation, policy environment, and corrupt local security arrangements have contributed to the opportunity for violence. The effects of the violence have included widespread displacements, loss of potential revenue, infrastructural damage, collapse of communities, and perpetual insecurity. However, in order to bring sanity to the sector, a multi-pronged approach targeting the security and policy architecture, mining communities, and state actors needs to be adopted so as to prevent, diffuse, and address ongoing cases of mining violence across the Midlands gold-rich regions.

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