



GOING AFTER THE GOGOS

South Africa's 'welfare fraud' crackdown

Summary

- South Africa's social grant system is perceived to be rife with fraud—with grant payments being made to persons who are not entitled to them, depriving eligible and vulnerable people of their rights.
- However, available data shows that the majority of social grant frauds are perpetrated by government officials and predatory third parties—not by beneficiaries.
- Government has pledged to crack down on welfare fraud through intensified reviews, biometric verification, and big data surveillance.
- These anti-fraud measures overwhelmingly target the poor—piling suspicion and compliance requirements on normal beneficiaries, while allowing systemic corruption and predatory exploitation by private actors to persist.
- The requirements are onerous and difficult for the most vulnerable to navigate, and they end up wrongly excluding many eligible people.
- Beneficiaries are doubly victimised in this system—first by fraudsters, and then by government agencies who punish them for fraud they are not responsible for.
- To make sure everyone who needs a grant gets one, the government should do away with narrow targeting, root out corruption in the public sector, and clamp down on those who seek to profiteer from vulnerable beneficiaries.

Introduction

Abuse, waste and fraud in public finances is one of the defining challenges facing South Africa. We hear every week of the misappropriation and diversion of taxpayer funds, and this has grave consequences for the nation's ability to fund its priorities and take care of its people.

One sector where we hear a lot about fraud is social grants. Fraud in social grants is especially egregious, because it consists of funds being stolen that were intended for vulnerable and impoverished children, persons with disabilities, seniors and the unemployed.

This factsheet explores fraud in the social grant system. We ask: What is the overall scale of fraud in social grants? Where and how is fraud being perpetrated? Who is perpetrating it? What is the government doing to stop it... and are these interventions working?

Based on the answers to these questions, we recommend ways that the government can better combat fraud in the social grant system, to safeguard the rights and entitlements of vulnerable members of the public.



THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF A UBIG

- ✓ **UNIVERSAL** – applies to all adults.
- ✓ **BASIC** – covers basic necessities.
- ✓ **INCOME** – a regular cash benefit.
- ✓ **GUARANTEE** – provided as a right.

Where is fraud occurring in the grant system, and on what scale?

Fraud refers to the act of making false representations or intentionally deceiving others for financial gain.

In relation to social grants in South Africa, fraud occurs when a person or people who are not entitled to receive social grant money, obtain it through deliberate deception.

Fraud is a criminal offence in South Africa. To qualify as a crime, the fraud must have been intentional and result in actual or potential harm to another person.

Our analysis shows:

The largest share of reported frauds in the social grant system by value have been perpetrated by government officials, employees and contractors, or predatory third parties like money lenders...not individual grant beneficiaries.

BUT

The government's crackdown on fraud is focused on policing individual grant beneficiaries and cancelling grants.

DSD and SASSA report annually on social grant fraud, and provide breakdowns of the number of fraud cases reported to law enforcement. This data indicates that government officials make up the vast majority of persons who have "unduly benefitted" from the social grant system.

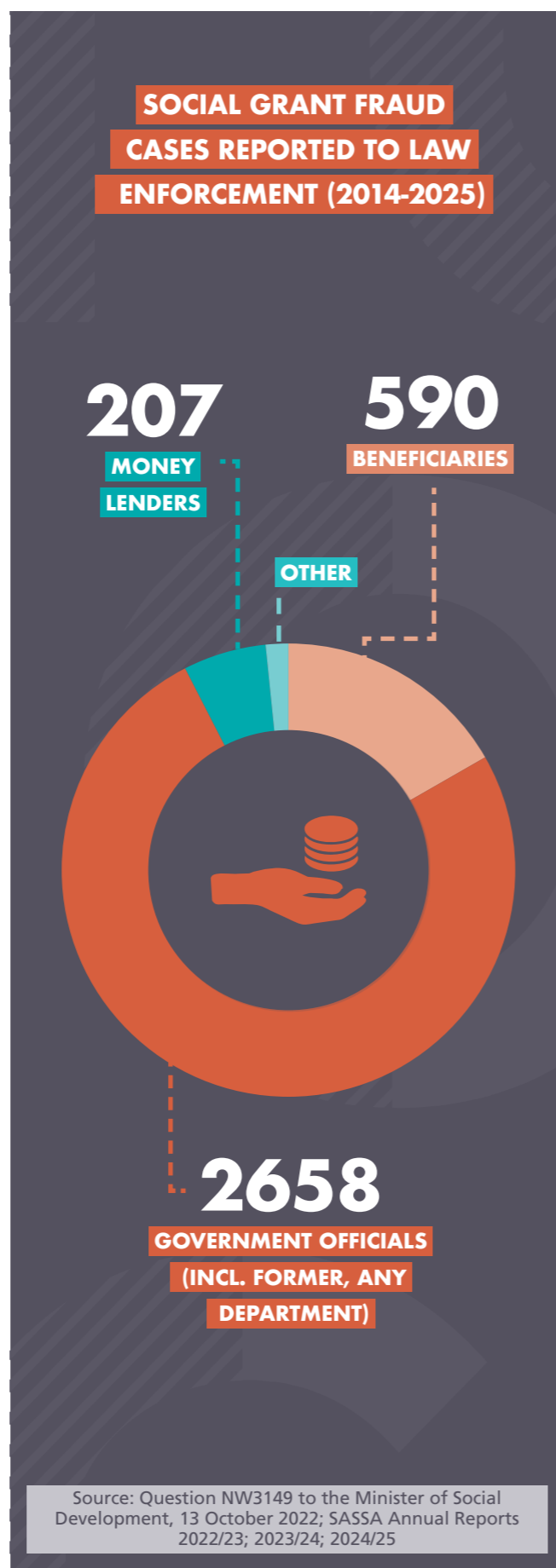
We explore the different categories of social grant fraud below.

1. Fraud perpetrated by government officials and contractors

One of the most recognisable forms of fraud in South Africa is fraud perpetrated by government insiders or officials who have access to public funds as they move through institutional processes like procurement, tenders, and the provision of basic services. This falls under the umbrella of government corruption. In recent years many high profile corruption scandals have been uncovered in the social grant system which have garnered significant media attention and served to erode trust. Instances of fraud by government officials, employees and contractors which have been reported in the media include:

2025: A SASSA branch manager colludes with a Post Office teller and a private person to steal R250000 worth of grants from beneficiaries by duplicating their cards and making withdrawals before the beneficiaries could.¹

2025: Three SASSA officials arrested at Idutywa Local Office in the Eastern Cape, found to be in possession of identity documents and undisclosed cash.^{2 3}



2025: Eight Johannesburg SASSA officials among eleven accused of the theft of R260 million from SASSA as part of a "ghost card" syndicate.⁴

2022: A Post Office official is alleged to have diverted R200 000 in uncollected grants to himself.⁵

2018-2023: A possible fraud at a SASSA office in Cradock, Eastern Cape, whereby grants are paid to 486 "ghost beneficiaries", amounting to over R55m.⁶

2020-2021: A Post Office manager creates ghost beneficiaries in the Post Office/SASSA system and pays them inflated grant amounts totaling 2.2m.⁷

2018-2021: SASSA officials change beneficiaries' bank accounts without their knowledge and collect their grants. Beneficiaries later reimbursed R21m.

2020: The Auditor General finds that 1513 SRD beneficiaries were directors of companies with government contracts. It is unclear whether these beneficiaries had income from the contracts at the time they accessed the grant (which would make the access fraudulent).⁸

2014-2022: A person collects approximately R100 000 in Older Person's Grant (OPG) payments despite being the owner of a company that won police service tenders worth R60m. The person failed to disclose their other income to SASSA.⁹

2017-2022: Another instance of a person collecting R123 000 in OPG payments despite being the owner of a company awarded tenders worth R88m to supply police with furniture.¹⁰

2020: A December 2021 Auditor General's report finds that 5812 'government employees' had accessed the Covid-19 SRD grant in 2020 at a cost of R5.8m. Follow up investigations by DSD, SASSA and the DPSA found that a proportion of this group was eligible for the grant (no longer employed by the government). Based on these published findings we can estimate that approximately 64% of this group accessed the grant fraudulently—amounting to an R3.71m cost.¹¹

2020-2021: Four Post Office officials are found to have been manipulating payment systems, inflating grant values and creating ghost beneficiaries—defrauding beneficiaries of R10.2m.¹²

2018-2019: Three SASSA officials collude with private persons to recruit non-disabled people to apply for a disability grant for a fee in Tzaneen, Limpopo—fraud value R300 000.

2018: 87 alleged fraudulent grant transactions amounting to R1.8m processed by two SASSA officials in the Eastern Cape.¹³

The government has not publicly reported on exactly how much money has been stolen from grant beneficiaries by government employees in recent years. However, the cases above represent at least R354.88million defrauded from social grants by public officials since 2014.

2. Large-scale security breaches

Another form of fraud in social grants is fraud perpetrated by external persons or groups on a large scale, by "hacking" or exploiting vulnerabilities in the way grants are managed. The highest profile case of this type in recent years has been the use of potentially hundreds of thousands of stolen identities to apply for Covid-19 SRD grants.

In 2024 an unusually high number of applications was discovered to have been made by people who had recently turned 18 (the age of eligibility for the grant).¹⁴ It is likely that a syndicate of fraudsters used the ID numbers of people just turning 18 to open SRD grant applications before the ID-holders could do it themselves.

It is not clear whether the identity theft resulted in fraudulent payments actually being made. In order to access grant money, the fraudsters would have needed to also open bank accounts and register phone numbers in the name of those whose IDs they had used.

3. Private actors profiteering from social grants

A third type of fraud in social grants occurs when private actors profit off or exploit grant beneficiaries, through deception or misrepresentation. This might involve for instance deducting or siphoning money from people's grants without authorisation, or predatory marketing using privileged access to beneficiary data. The former is sometimes investigated and prosecuted, whereas the latter very rarely results in prosecution. Recent cases in this category include:

2025: An illicit credit scheme wherein a 61 year old woman was alleged to have been unlawfully retaining beneficiaries' cards in order to make withdrawals from their social grant accounts as loan repayments.¹⁵

2025: A reported uptick in unauthorised deductions from social grants by financial service providers for insurance and funeral policy products that beneficiaries deny having signed up for.¹⁶

2025: A number of websites found to be mimicking the official SASSA website, in order to collect and sell beneficiaries' personal information.¹⁷

2012-2018: SASSA contractor Cash Paymaster Services (CPS) accused of using its privileged access to grant beneficiary information to target them for predatory financial products and make unlawful deductions from grants. CPS's contract with SASSA was terminated after public outcry and multiple litigations.¹⁸

4. Individuals obtaining grants they do not qualify for

The final type of fraud that we hear about frequently in the social grant system is the issue of individuals accessing grants when they do not meet the qualifying criteria (also known as inclusion errors). For example people who have personal income above the means-test threshold who nevertheless get grants and whose actions have been termed by the government as 'double dipping'.¹⁹

Generally, when social grant fraud is spoken about in the media and by government officials, this is the type that is being referred to.²⁰ It is important to bear in mind that the access to the grants must have been based on an intentional misrepresentation, in order to qualify as fraud under South African criminal law. In other words, grant recipients need to have known they were ineligible and deliberately have misled SASSA. In many cases people included in error have not deliberately misrepresented

themselves, but apply because they believe they may be eligible. Therefore it is important to differentiate between “inclusion errors” and fraud.

Recent reported cases of beneficiary fraud include:

2012-2025: Four women found to have been collecting the Child Support Grant (CSG) for “ghost children”—whose birth certificates had been forged. Ordered to pay back a total of R61 256 to the state.²¹

2020: The government claimed that 4 726 people had collected the SRD grant from outside the borders of South Africa. In order to qualify for the grant, people must reside in South Africa so this may signal grant fraud—however it is not clear whether these people normally resided in South Africa.²²

2020: The Auditor General claims that 67 770 SRD grant beneficiaries were potentially ineligible because they may be receiving NSFAS, UIF, other social grants, or other income.²³ However, the methodology on which this claim is based is later discredited—as the databases used to determine this were inaccurate and out of date.

What is the government doing about social grant fraud?

The Department of Social Development (DSD), SASSA and National Treasury are all pledging to crack down on social grant fraud.

The Minister of Social Development Sisi Tolashe has stated that her priority is to tackle fraud and corruption.²⁴

SASSA has set up a fraud management unit to identify potential fraud and address cases when they arise.

The government’s response to concerns about fraud in the grant system has been to intensify poverty targeting efforts, to make sure that grants are only paid to people who are below a certain income level.²⁵ The problem with this is that the income eligibility thresholds (especially for the SRD grant) are set so low that even people who have incomes above that level can still be in extreme poverty, and in need of social assistance. Under the current approach, people who fall into this category face the risk of being branded “fraudsters”.

Instead of protecting social grant beneficiaries from predation and corruption, National Treasury, DSD and SASSA are tightening eligibility requirements, and criminalising impoverished mothers, seniors, and people with disabilities, under the banner of fraud prevention.

In 2025, National Treasury placed compliance conditions on SASSA’s operating budget, which stipulate procedures and practices that SASSA must put in place to detect ineligible grant beneficiaries, cancel their grants and potentially refer them to law enforcement.²⁶ Below we analyse the procedures, whether they will be able to reduce social grant fraud, and what their broader impact will be.

Fraud prevention measure	Explanation	Type of fraud targeted	Effectiveness	Impact
Government database checks	SASSA automatically checks applicants and beneficiaries against government databases including UIF, SARS, NSFAS and others, to verify whether they have undisclosed income.	Ineligible individuals - “inclusion errors”	LOW These databases are often out of date and inaccurate. SASSA has admitted repeatedly that the database checks are not an effective method for verifying means. However, National Treasury requires SASSA to perform these checks as a condition for providing its operating budget.	Database checks have been shown to wrongfully exclude up to a third of all rightful beneficiaries. ²⁷
Fraud risk algorithm	SASSA monitors “data and metadata” via a “sophisticated algorithm” which flags grant applicants and beneficiaries considered to present a “fraud risk”.	Ineligible individuals - “inclusion errors”; Security breaches/identity theft	UNKNOWN Very little information has been made available regarding (1) what data the algorithm uses, (2) what logics it is based on and (3) how accurate it is at determining fraud risk.	Many thousands of legitimate SRD grant beneficiaries have been flagged by the fraud risk algorithm and required to navigate additional biometric verification to receive their grants. Many are unable to do so. Internationally, the algorithmic profiling of welfare beneficiaries has been shown to have discriminatory and harmful impacts on the most vulnerable. ²⁸

Fraud prevention measure	Explanation	Type of fraud targeted	Effectiveness	Impact
Credit bureau checks	SASSA uses data shared by credit bureaus to automatically flag beneficiaries suspected of having an alternative income, for in-person reviews.	Ineligible individuals - “inclusion errors”	LOW It appears that the review decisions are based on historical declarations given by beneficiaries when applying for credit. Many of these declarations seem to be very outdated and unrelated to beneficiaries’ current financial status.	Older persons’ grant recipients (pensioners) and disability grant recipients seem to be the most impacted by this process—because outdated information is used to flag them for possible fraud—which relates to before they retired or became disabled. This has led to hundreds of thousands of elderly and disabled individuals having to obtain onerous documentation and stand in queues at SASSA offices for multiple days in order to try to disprove that they have an income. It is unclear whether the credit bureau checks have resulted in actual cases of fraud being identified.
In-person reviews	After people are flagged by the fraud risk algorithm, credit bureau, bank and database checks, they are required to present to a SASSA office with extensive documentation so that SASSA can confirm their ongoing eligibility.	Ineligible individuals - “inclusion errors”	LOW In order to effectively prevent fraud, this in-person review system must be accessible, efficient and resourced. Unfortunately SASSA lacks the capacity to process the reviews. 210000 people were placed under review in May. Once placed under review, people have 3 months to complete their review otherwise SASSA will consider them fraud cases. However SASSA has revealed that it only has capacity to carry out 25000 in-person reviews each month. Many low income people do not have ongoing access to the same contact details, so cannot receive notifications from SASSA that they have been placed under review. Completing a review requires people to obtain extensive documentation such as affidavits, bank statements, certified identity documents, marriage documents, which require them to interface with multiple agencies and incur various costs—all of which present barriers to those on low incomes.	Many people have been unable to access the in-person review process, either because of long queues at SASSA offices, the costs of obtaining documents to prove their eligibility, the costs of transport, physical disabilities, or because they do not receive notice that they have been placed under review. For those who cannot complete their reviews in the stipulated timeframe, SASSA has stated that they will be considered fraud cases and passed on to law enforcement, and their grants will be cancelled.
“Electronic Know Your Customer” (eKYC) / Biometric verification	SASSA uses biometric enrollment and verification methods (fingerprints and facial recognition) to authenticate the identity of grant applicants and beneficiaries, and guard against the risk of fraudsters applying for grants using stolen identities	Security breaches, identity theft, external actors	LOW TO MEDIUM In theory biometric identification can help to ensure that applications are genuine. However, the system relies on integration with the DHA Smart ID Card database, whose functionality is contested. SRD grant applicants with green ID books cannot verify their identity. Many people do not receive the SMS link to verify. Many people do not have access to the resources required to complete verification. Facial recognition technology has been shown to discriminate against women of colour in particular.	Biometric verification presents an insurmountable barrier to the most vulnerable to access their grants, ending up excluding many eligible beneficiaries (often those most in need).

Fraud prevention measure	Explanation	Type of fraud targeted	Effectiveness	Impact
Bank account checks	SASSA partners with all major South African banks to regularly monitor the bank accounts of grant applicants and beneficiaries, to automatically detect if they have undisclosed income.	Ineligible individuals - "inclusion errors"	LOW Bank account inflows are not the same as income. Many people have money in their bank account that is not their own personal income - like child maintenance, or loans. The IEJ's research found that 76% of SRD grant rejections based on bank checks were wrong. ²⁹ Family caregivers, mothers, and rural households are most likely to be disadvantaged. Relying on bank account checks also incentivises people to transact in cash—leaving a glaring loophole for fraudsters to exploit.	Bank account checks: Exclude a large proportion of eligible beneficiaries AND Allow ineligible people to game the system
Biometric user access system	Government officials need to biometrically verify their identity in order to access the internal systems.	Government officials/ employees	UNKNOWN Little information is publicly available about the status of this system, its functionality or efficacy.	

Going after the gogos

The government's fraud prevention measures are blunt instruments that exclude many more rightful beneficiaries than fraudsters.

Since May 2025, hundreds of thousands of rightful beneficiaries have been caught up in the net of SASSA's flawed and faceless big data surveillance machinery—flagged for "review" by credit bureau and database checks. These beneficiaries are seniors, disabled persons and caregivers.

Desperate elderly and disabled people have been forced to queue for days at SASSA offices to try to prove their innocence. Some have experienced medical emergencies while doing so. Many say that they have not earned an income for years or decades, yet they risk being branded as fraudsters based on their historic credit data.

Research shows that automated means of verification through government databases and banks has resulted in the wrongful exclusion of between a third and half of eligible applicants. While some people who do have income that they failed to disclose to SASSA will be identified and their grants cancelled, the cost of this will be the cancellation of the grants of many more deserving beneficiaries who should be qualifying.

Fraud is occurring in the social grant system. But it is largely being perpetrated by officials and predatory money lenders and other third parties. Yet, using the narrative of fraud, National Treasury and SASSA are going after vulnerable people.

"We've been standing here since 6 this morning and we're in the rain, us elderly people, and I don't know who's going to do anything about it [...] we come here, we fill in all the forms, we leave, then they come back, they want more forms to be filled in." – Pensioner queuing in Cape Town, 21 July 2025³⁰

"Tiffany (we've withheld her surname) had come to reapply for her disability grant [...] this month she did not receive payment as SASSA now wants her to show proof of divorce from her husband. Tiffany has been separated from her husband for 16 years and does not know where he is. "He was the one who crippled me," said Tiffany, who walks on crutches. She has no other source of income and has had to sell some of her personal belongings to afford transport and rent." – GroundUp, Durban, June 2025³¹

"She had come to the SASSA office to request that someone come to her home to speak to [her husband], because he is blind and bedridden. She was frustrated that she had to "leave her husband alone for hours" to query why he didn't get his grant payment." – GroundUp, Durban, June 2025³²

"I took my mom at half past 5am, if not a little bit earlier. Thousands of people were in that queue who hadn't received their pensions [...] They stood all day, leaning against the wall of the shops. My mom said it was the worst experience she ever had." – Daughter of pensioner queuing in Belville, August 2025³³

"I have experienced [...] long queues out in the cold and being turned away with my 87-year-old mother due to errors on their digital fingerprint systems. [...] If the government continues to neglect this sector, then they have failed the most vulnerable and desperate old age people." – Daughter of pensioner, letter to the editor, GroundUp, May 2025³⁴

How to protect beneficiaries

Social grant fraud deprives people of their entitlements and diverts limited resources from those who need them most.

SASSA claims that its fraud prevention measures are intended to protect rightful beneficiaries, to ensure that their social grants don't end up in the hands of fraudsters. However, in reality the measures SASSA has adopted (at the behest of National Treasury) are ineffective at preventing the types of frauds that commonly occur in the grant system.

Moreover they perpetuate the thing they are ostensibly meant to prevent—the exclusion of vulnerable people from social assistance. To truly safeguard the social grant system and uphold its duty of care to the public, SASSA and the Department of Social Development and the government at large must:

- Refuse to implement National Treasury's unfit, harmful and potentially illegal fraud-prevention requirements;
- Move away from narrow poverty targeting whereby those not considered the "poorest of the poor" are branded fraudsters;
- Ensure human oversight and responsible stewardship and accountability of digital and automated systems involved in identifying fraud cases;
- Focus on rooting out corruption among officials and profiteering private actors;
- Rein in National Treasury and ensure proportionate, appropriate and democratic decision-making on social grants, and
- Make sure there is enough funding for everyone who needs a grant.



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