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OPINION AND ANALYSIS

Editorial

On gun deaths, we are the pot calling the kettle black

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By Sunday Times



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Image: 123RF/123RF Premium

There are few issues that elicit as much outrage as the frequent mass shootings in the US, with South Africans often joining the chorus of condemnation. We react so strongly because of the tragic loss of life and because, from where we stand, what has become an American disease seems so

easy to fix. If guns were not as readily available in the US, there would be fewer mass shootings. Period.

We ponder the lives lost - 102 people dead in 17 mass killings so far this year, according to ABC News - and the trauma experienced by survivors and witnesses,

and we shake our heads over how preventable it all was. But in our own country, we have the exact same pathology going on - gun control is simply not stringent enough, and as a result a staggering average of 23 people are shot dead every day.

According to Gun Free SA (GFSA), there are challenges facing enforcement of the Firearms Control Act, which was enacted 20 years ago but has still not been fully implemented.

First, courts are failing to make declarations of unfitness to own a firearm. One police officer told GFSA: "In most instances that I have seen, a person will be convicted of a crime in court and nothing is said about the firearm."

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Second, even when people are declared unfit, they do not necessarily surrender their weapons. This is due to a "breakdown in the chain of communication between the courts and the relevant police officials", according to GFSA research.

Then there's the issue of the Central Firearms Registry, which is dysfunctional. As a result, police are not able to immediately determine if someone who has applied for a gun licence should be blocked from doing so.

Last, we simply don't have enough staff and technology to conduct thorough background checks on those seeking guns.

Gun deaths in SA are a national tragedy that plays out every day, though without generating the shock of a US-style massacre. But it's the same logic: if guns were not as readily available in this country, there would be far fewer gun-related deaths. Period.