



FIREARMS CONTROL BRIEFING: POLICE KILLINGS: PROTECTING MEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

BACKGROUND

In early March police Constable Buti shot and killed his wife before turning the gun on himself following an argument; the couple have a 6-year old child who witnessed the shootings.¹ A week earlier Sergeant Brooks shot and killed his girlfriend, her mother and himself during a hostage incident.²

Parliament has responded to these killings with shock, noting that all stakeholders have a role to play in saving lives and protecting police members and their families.³ Police officers experiencing stress due to operational duties or personal challenges have been encouraged to make use of available wellness programmes offered by the South African Police Service (SAPS); family members are advised to report abnormal behaviour to the supervisors of SAPS members; and colleagues, especially supervisors are urged to take proactive steps.

Is there more that can be done? This Briefing looks more closely at the circumstances under which police are killed or kill to identify risk factors and interventions to protect those entrusted to protect us.

POLICE BEING KILLED: MOST MEMBERS ARE OFF-DUTY

As shown in Table 1, which summarises available data on police killings from 2010-11 to 2016-17:⁴

- The number of police officers killed in South Africa is high, averaging 83 officers a year or 7 a month.
- This number has remained relatively stable since 2010-11, despite a range of interventions to reduce police killings since this time (see Box 1 on page 7 for a summary of these), which indicates that what's already been tried hasn't been effective in reducing police deaths.
- Contrary to popular belief, most police killings occur when members are off-duty.

Table 1: Number of police officers killed on- and off-duty between 2010-11 and 2016-17								
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	Monthly average
On-duty	36	38	29	29	35	34	34	3
Off-duty	57	43	55	48	51	45	49	4
Total	93	81	84	77	86	79	83	7

¹ Phaliso, Sandiso. Cop shoots wife, then himself. Cape Times, 12 March 2018. Available online at <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/cop-shoots-wife-then-himself-13728030> (accessed 14 March 2018).

² Serra, Genevieve. Cop in hostage drama kills two before committing suicide. Daily Voice, 1 March 2018. Available online at <https://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/cop-in-hostage-drama-kills-two-before-committing-suicide-13543163> (accessed 14 March 2018).

³ Malepo, Malatswa. Police officers' suicides and killing of partners to be raised with NASCOM. Statement issued by the Parliamentary Communication Services on behalf of the Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Police, Mr Francois Beukman, 12 March 2018. Available online at <https://www.parliament.gov.za/press-releases/police-officers-suicides-and-killing-partners-be-raised-nascom> (accessed 14 March 2018).

⁴ South African Police Service Annual Reports from 2010-11 through to 2016-17.



According to researcher, David Bruce, there has not been a single year since 1991 in which on-duty police killings outnumbered off-duty deaths.⁵ Despite this, the “SAPS remains unable to provide a coherent account of the circumstances in which police are being killed – in particular why so many are killed off duty.”⁶ The result is continued speculation over whether police members are specifically targeted because of their profession or whether attacks and murders are nothing more than ordinary crime.

CIRCUMSTANCES RESULTING IN POLICE MEMBERS BEING KILLED

i. On-duty

Three out of seven police members killed every month die while on-duty. Each year, the SAPS Annual Report notes that, “an analysis of incidents where members were killed on duty indicated that most members were murdered when attending to complaints or during the apprehension and searching of suspects.”⁷ A 2015 SAPS analysis of police murders observes that most police members that are killed are shot dead by a suspect.⁸

ii. Off-duty

Four of the seven SAPS members killed each month die while off-duty; this section analyses four main circumstances under which police members die when not at work:

Suicide

Suicide by SAPS members has been described as an “epidemic.”⁹ Between 2012 and 2013, 115 members died by suicide, an average of 73.9 per 100,000 officers;¹⁰ in contrast South Africa’s national suicide average is 13.4 per 100,000.¹¹

According to the SAPS, the five most common “mental health challenges” facing members (in order of prevalence) are:¹²

- Depression (makes up 89% of diagnosed cases)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (22%)
- Stress disorders
- Substance abuse (5%)
- Attempted suicides

⁵ Bruce, David. 2016. Improving data on killings of police. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police Seminar on Risk Factors for Policing, 17 February. Parliament of South Africa. Minutes and presentation courtesy of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, available online at <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/22033/> (accessed 14 March 2018).

⁶ Bruce, David. 2015. Analysis: [Three out of every five police killed off duty](#). Daily Maverick, 9 September 2015.

⁷ South African Police Service 2016-17 Annual Report, p. 118.

⁸ South African Police Service. 2015. Measures implemented to ensure safety of SAPS members and address unnatural deaths. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police, 28 August. Parliament of South Africa.

⁹ Perkins, Grainne. 2016. Shedding light on the hidden epidemic of police suicide in South Africa. *Mental Health Matters*, Volume 3, Issue 4, July, pp. 50-52, p. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Matzopoulos, Richard, et al. 2015. Injury-related mortality in South Africa: a retrospective descriptive study of postmortem investigations. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, Volume 93, pp. 303–313.

¹² Phahlane, Lt. General JK. 2016. SAPS Employee Health and Wellness. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police Seminar on Risk Factors for Policing, 17 February. Parliament of South Africa. Minutes and presentation courtesy of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, available online at <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/22033/> (accessed 14 March 2018).



The SAPS members most at risk of committing suicide are aged between 30 and 34 years, with the most common causes of suicide being relationship challenges (includes both private and workplace relationships), financial difficulties, disciplinary issues in the workplace, psychiatric conditions, and substance abuse.¹³

In recognition of the operational, external and personal risks that police members are exposed to, the SAPS provides a range of psychological support programmes through its Employee Health and Wellness Service, including Choose Life (a seven-module suicide prevention course) as well as anger management, stress management and integrated mental health programmes.¹⁴

However, research shows that members, even those suffering from post-traumatic depression or high levels of stress, “will not go for professional help because it is perceived as a sign of weakness.”¹⁵ Moreover, efforts to seek help are further mitigated by the “perception that asking for counselling is an admission of not being fit for duty or being trusted in the field.”¹⁶ As such, calls by the South African Police Union for improved counselling for members following the two most recent murder-suicides involving police officers are unlikely to be effective.¹⁷

While there is no doubt that understanding *why* police commit suicide, that is, unpacking those factors that increase the risk of suicide in order to mitigate their effect; an often overlooked intervention, and one of the most successful in suicide prevention, is looking at the *how* of suicide, that is, the means, or weapon, used to commit suicide. As early as 2012, parliament expressed concern at, “SAPS members using state firearms to commit murder and suicide.”¹⁸

Arguments and disputes

Most murders in South Africa, including those involving police members, arise from arguments or disputes between people who are often known to each other.¹⁹

According to the SAPS, the five most common reasons why police members attack someone they know, be it a spouse or intimate partner, family member, friend or colleague are because of relationship challenges (at work and in private life), financial difficulties, mood disorders, substance abuse, and sexual harassment.²⁰

As with suicide, while it’s important to understand *why* police members attack others, including those they love, to address these root causes; the *how* is also important in prevention – as a gun increases the lethality of such attacks. South African research shows that legal gun ownership significantly increases the risk of intimate femicide-suicide (the killing of a female by her intimate partner followed by the suicide of the perpetrator within a week of the homicide), with two-thirds (66%) of intimate femicide-suicide perpetrators

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Perkins, Grainne. 2016. Shedding light on the hidden epidemic of police suicide in South Africa. *Mental Health Matters*, Volume 3, Issue 4, July, pp. 50-52, p. 51.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Palm, Kaylynn. SAPU concerned about high rates of suicide cases among police. EWN, 4 March 2018. Available online at <http://ewn.co.za/2018/03/04/sapu-concerned-about-high-rates-of-suicide-cases-among-police> (accessed 14 March 2018).

¹⁸ Chikunga, LS. 2012. Comments made by the chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Police during a briefing by the South African Police Service (SAPS) on its Strategic Plan, Annual Performance Plan and Budget for 2012/13: Administration, 16 April. Parliament of South Africa. Minutes and presentation courtesy of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, available online at <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/14171/> (accessed 15 March 2018).

¹⁹ Bruce, David. 2016. Improving data on killings of police. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police Seminar on Risk Factors for Policing, 17 February 2016. Parliament of South Africa. Minutes and presentation courtesy of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, available online at <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/22033/> (accessed 14 March 2018).

²⁰ Phahlane, Lt. General JK. 2016. SAPS Employee Health and Wellness. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police Seminar on Risk Factors for Policing, 17 February. Parliament of South Africa. Minutes and presentations courtesy of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, available online at <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/22033/> (accessed 14 March 2018).



in 1999 owning a legal gun.²¹ Further, a significant proportion of intimate partner-suicide perpetrators are employed in the police, army or private security industry, showing that easy access to guns increases the risk for intimate partner-suicide.²²

Targeted crime

According to the SAPS, members killed off-duty are "primarily victims of crime (vehicle hijackings and robberies)."²³

It's possible, even probable, that criminals target police members for their service weapons: Police members have lost (through targeted crime or negligence and while both on- and off-duty) a total of 6,375 firearms since 2010-11, which is an average of two guns a day.²⁴ Despite this high number, no independent study has explored the circumstances resulting in police gun loss or theft, including whether criminals deliberately target police officers to steal their service pistols.

Whether or not police members are targeted by robbers wanting service weapons or other belongings, the chances of an officer being killed during a robbery is potentially heightened as members, because of their profession, are more likely to resist, thereby "increasing their risk of violent death."²⁵ International research supports this: Owners of handguns are significantly more often victims of contact crimes (murder, assault, robbery), with researchers noting that gun ownership "may generate the 'illusion of invincibility'. This mental state could result in risk-taking or provocative behaviour which enhances victimization risks...In some countries, those in possession of a gun may share values of a macho or honour culture which further stimulates them to act dangerously."²⁶

Crime prevention

As mentioned, crime prevention, such as responding to robberies, domestic disputes and conducting search and seizure operations is the reason for most on-duty police killings.²⁷ It also accounts for at least some off-duty deaths as members, "place themselves on duty."²⁸ According to Bruce, the police's '24-hour rule', which is not an official instruction, contains within it an understanding that police members are on duty 24-hours a day and an expectation that an off-duty officer who encounters a crime will intervene, despite the increased risk as the officer is without backup or protective clothing.²⁹

INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE AND PREVENT POLICE MEMBERS BEING KILLED AND KILLING

There is no doubt that police in South Africa face significant pressure and stress as they deal daily with life and death; trying to prevent crime committed by armed and violent criminals while keeping within the law and investigating violent crime like murder and rape. While a number of interventions are needed to protect the police and their families, the prevalence of guns increases police members' risk of being killed, of killing

²¹ Mathews, Shanaaz, et al. 2008. Intimate femicide–suicide in South Africa: a cross-sectional study. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, Volume 86, pp. 552–558.

²² Ibid.

²³ South African Police Service Annual Report 2016-17, p. 118.

²⁴ South African Police Service Annual Reports from 2010-11 through to 2016-17.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ van Kesteren, John. 2014. Revisiting the gun ownership and violence link: A multilevel analysis of victimization survey data, *British Journal of Criminology*, Volume 54, pp. 53-72, p. 69.

²⁷ South African Police Service. 2015. Measures implemented to ensure safety of SAPS members and address unnatural deaths. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police, 28 August. Parliament of South Africa.

²⁸ Bruce, David. 2015. Analysis: [Three out of every five police killed off duty](#). Daily Maverick, 9 September 2015.

²⁹ Ibid.



themselves and of killing others. Below are two key interventions that, if implemented immediately, could protect police members and their families:

1. Reduce availability of service pistols to off-duty members

Section 98 of the Firearms Control Act (2000) deals with the possession and use of firearms by Official Institutions, including the SAPS. Under this section each SAPS member requires a permit to possess and use a firearm when on duty. However, “Unless the permit...indicates otherwise, the employee must - at the end of each period of his or her duty, return the firearm in question to the place of storage designated for this purpose by the Official Institution.”³⁰

The SAPS has operationalised Section 98 of the FCA through Standing Order 48 of 2011 and National Instruction 4 of 2016.³¹ These describe in detail the process to issue firearms to on- and off-duty police members by way of a Firearms Permit System; and are clear that it is not government policy for police members to take service weapons home unless special permission has been granted and provision (e.g. the installation of an approved safe) made.

While government policy is clear, it appears that enforcement thereof has not been standardised countrywide; and that police members taking service weapons home is the norm rather than the exception. As such the SAPS is urged, as a matter of urgency, to look at the on-the-ground operationalisation of Standing Order 48 of 2011 and National Instruction 4 of 2016, as restricting the availability of service weapons to off-duty police members would:

- Reduce the lethality and thus the success of suicide attempts: Research into suicide prevention shows that the availability of guns increases both the risk of and the probability of a suicide attempt succeeding;³² which in turn underscores the importance of separating people at risk of committing suicide (like police officers – who face significant trauma and stress) from guns.
- Reduce the lethality of domestic violence: The high percentage of guns used in suicide and intimate femicide-suicide is attributed to the availability of guns and their lethality, with international research showing that guns are up to 12 times more likely to result in death than non-firearm assaults in intimate partner violence.³³
- Reduce the risk of police officers being killed off-duty: While it’s unclear whether criminals target police members for their guns, if members weren’t armed when off-duty this risk would be nullified. Moreover, if a 24-hour policing rule is present, off-duty police members may be less likely to intervene in a crime situation and more likely to call for assistance if unarmed.

2. Reduce levels of civilian gun ownership

Most police members killed in violent-related incidents in South Africa are shot dead.³⁴ Research internationally has shown that the more guns that are owned by civilians, the greater the risk of police

³⁰ Firearms Control Act 60 of 2000. Section 98 (5) (b).

³¹ Supply Chain Management Division. Standing Order (Stores) 48: Official firearms and ammunition. Consolidation Notice 6 of 2011. South African Police Service;

Visible Policing Division. National Instruction 4: The firearm permit system and firearm training. Consolidation Notice 7 of 2016. South African Police Service.

³² Duquet, Nils, et al. 2015. Firearms and Violent Deaths in Europe: An Exploratory Analysis of the Linkages Between Gun Ownership, Firearms Legislation and Violent Death. Flemish Peace Institute.

³³ Shaw, Margaret. 2013. Chapter 2: Too Close to Home – Guns and Intimate Partner Violence. Small Arms Survey 2013. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁴ South African Police Service. 2015. Measures implemented to ensure safety of SAPS members and address unnatural deaths. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police, 28 August. Parliament of South Africa.



officers being killed.³⁵ For instance, those US states with the highest levels of gun ownership are also the ones where police officers face the greatest risk of being shot in the line of duty, leading to the researchers urging policy makers to reduce levels of civilian gun ownership to protect police officers.³⁶

Under the Firearms Control Act, the SAPS is responsible for ensuring that only people who are “fit and proper” are granted the privilege of owning a gun. Unfortunately, since 2010, South Africa’s firearms control management system has not been properly enforced by the police, with a range of instances involving fraud, corruption and poor adherence to the law resulting in people who should not have guns being granted licences (a comprehensive list is available on request). It’s in the SAPS’ interest to audit all licences issued since 2010 to ensure that due process was followed and that current licensed gun owners meet the necessary criteria as per the Act to own a weapon. Moreover, proposed amendments to the Firearms Control Act (providing these include a commitment to implementation) will help protect police members from being killed by raising the barrier for civilian gun ownership, ensuring that licensed firearm owners are “fit and proper.”

CONCLUSION

The issue of police killing themselves and others because of trauma and stress is not new; since 2010-11 a range of interventions have been implemented to address this tragedy (see Box 1 below). However, as shown in Table 1 above, these interventions have not seen a decline in killings.

This Briefing focuses attention on the *how* of police-related killings, showing that the weapon most likely to be used is a gun, and identifying two interventions to remove guns and thus the lethality of crime and violence involving the police:

1. The SAPS to standardise the enforcement of Section 98 of the Firearms Control Act, which requires that police members leave service weapons at work when they go off-duty unless special permission has been granted to take a weapon home.
2. Reduce levels of civilian gun ownership.

³⁵ Kyriacou DN, et al. 2006. Police deaths in New York and London during the twentieth century. *Injury Prevention*, Volume 12, Issue 4, pp. 219-224.

³⁶ Swedler, David, et al. 2015. Firearm Prevalence and Homicides of Law Enforcement Officers in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*. Volume 105, Issue 10, October, pp. 2042-2048.



Box 1: SUMMARY OF SAPS-LED INTERVENTIONS AIMED AT PROTECTING POLICE MEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES SINCE 2010-11:

Two **seminars** have been held in parliament:

1. Summit Against Police Killings, 8 July 2011
2. Risk Factors for Policing Summit, 17 February 2016

SAPS-led **interventions**, none of which include mention of efforts to reduce the availability of firearms, include:³⁷

- Provision of employee health and wellness programmes for members including “substance abuse, conflict management, suicide prevention, biblical illustration of marriage.”
- Adoption of a Ten Point Plan at the 2011 Summit Against Police Killings, which makes provision for (amongst others) the establishment of a multi-disciplinary committee within the SAPS to effectively manage investigations on killing of police.
- The establishment in 2014 of this multi-disciplinary police safety committee to: Discuss sound methodologies to reduce police killings, attacks and suicides; Conduct an analysis of all incidents of attacks and killings of officials; Implement preventative measures to reduce attacks and killings of officials; Ensure a coordinated approach in dealing with the killing of police members; and Advocate zero tolerance for police killings.
- 2014 also saw the development of a Police Safety Strategy to strengthen and ensure the safety of members in the SAPS through “five pillars”:
 - Governance to establish a standardised regulatory environment to ensure police safety as a priority.
 - Proactive interventions to reduce attacks and unnatural deaths of police members on- and off-duty.
 - Reactive interventions to ensure arrest and conviction of offenders, as well as to restore confidence in the Criminal Justice System and to serve as a deterrent.
 - Redress and support interventions for members and families.
 - Monitoring and evaluation to inform prevention, responses, redress and support interventions and to determine whether the strategy is effective in reducing unnatural deaths of police members.
- In 2015-16 a *Back-To-Basics Police Safety Plan* was adopted.
- In 2016, SAPS’ Research Division was established, which identified police suicide prevention as a key area of research for 2016-2020; with the Head of the Division assuring parliamentarians that research will be undertaken “to scientifically understand the causes (and)...address the issue.”³⁸

³⁷ South African Police Service Annual Reports for 2011-12 and 2015-16;

Minister of Police's response to Question No. 478. Internal Question Paper No. 4-2014, 11 July 2014. Question and Answer courtesy of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, available online at https://pmg.org.za/question_reply/490/ (accessed 14 March 2018).

³⁸ Zulu, Lt. Gen. (Dr) B. SAPS Research Agenda 2016-2020. Briefing to the Portfolio Committee on Police, 2 November. Parliament of South Africa. Minutes courtesy of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, available online at <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/23586/> (accessed 15 March 2018).