

# Firearms Control Briefing

## Using the principle of limits to stop SA's gun violence epidemic

### Introduction

The latest quarterly crime statistics confirm the gun violence epidemic in South Africa: 30 people were murdered with a gun *every day* between 1 April and 30 June 2022, up from 23 a day in 2019/20. This Briefing summarises the latest statistics on gun violence in South Africa, as well as studies that offer solutions to our gun violence epidemic.

### Gun violence in SA

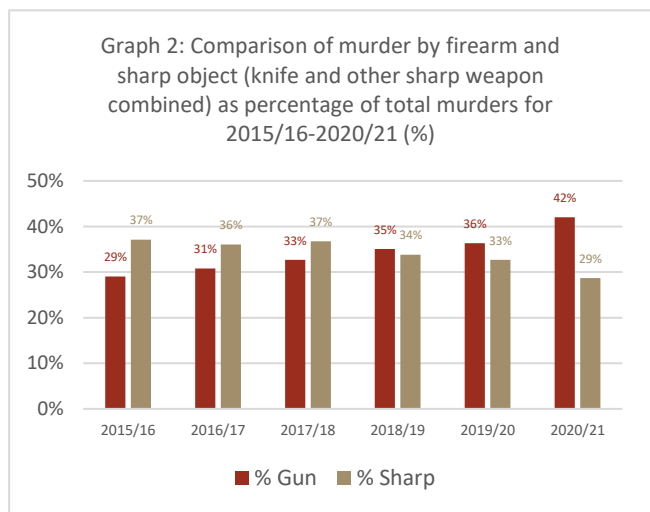
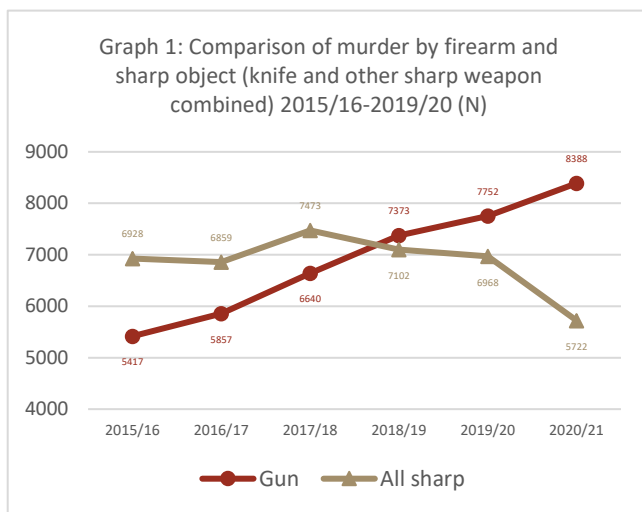
#### Murder

##### **Guns are the leading cause of murder in South Africa:**

30 people are murdered by gunshot and 15 people are murdered by stabbing every day in South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

As shown in Graphs 1 and 2,<sup>2</sup> the number of people murdered with a gun has steadily increased from 5,417 murders in 2015/16 (when 29% of all murders were from gunshot) to 8,388 in 2020/21 (when 42% of murders were from gunshot).

The figures for 2020/21 show the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns. As illustrated, even when alcohol was banned, movement was restricted and policing was intensified, the proportion of firearm murders increased to a high of 42% of all murders that year, while stab-related murders declined, as did almost all other crimes (for instance overall murder rates dropped 6.35%). This national pattern was first noted in the Western Cape, which has a



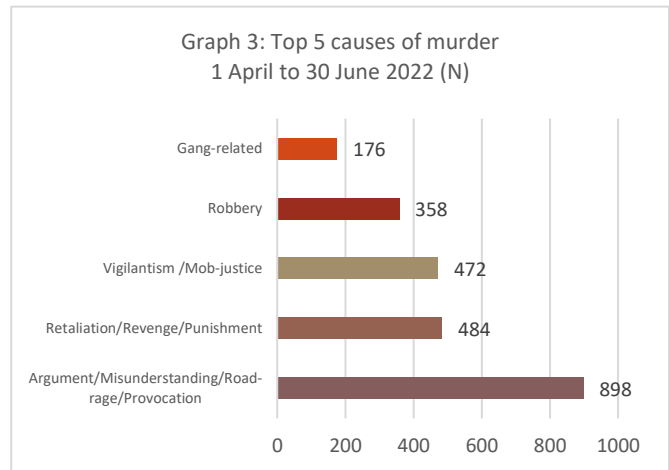
<sup>1</sup> The latest quarterly crime statistics for 1 April to 30 June 2022 include information on the weapon used in 72% of murders which show that:  
 - 2,766 people were murdered with a firearm; and  
 - 1,380 were murdered with a sharp weapon (935 were murdered with a knife and 445 were murdered with a “sharp instrument”). Source: South African Police Service. 2022. Police recorded crime statistics Republic of South Africa: First quarter of 2022/2023 financial year (April and June 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Data for Graphs 1 and 2 sourced as follows:  
 - Type of weapon (firearm, knife or other sharp object) used in murders in 2015/16 to 2016/17: South African Police Service (2019). Reply to Parliamentary Question 15. Parliamentary Monitoring Group. (Online). Available at <https://static.pmg.org.za/RNW15-190322.docx> (downloaded 13 October 2022).  
 - Type of weapon (firearm, knife or other sharp object) used in murders in 2017/18 to 2020/21: South African Police Service (2021). Reply to Parliamentary Question 1637. Parliamentary Monitoring Group. (Online). Available at <https://static.pmg.org.za/RNW1637-2021-06-25.docx> (downloaded 13 October 2022).

comprehensive injury surveillance system in place, “While the number of people killed with firearms dipped under (Covid-19 lockdown) Levels 5 and 4, the decline was marginal compared to sharp-object murders... .”<sup>3</sup>

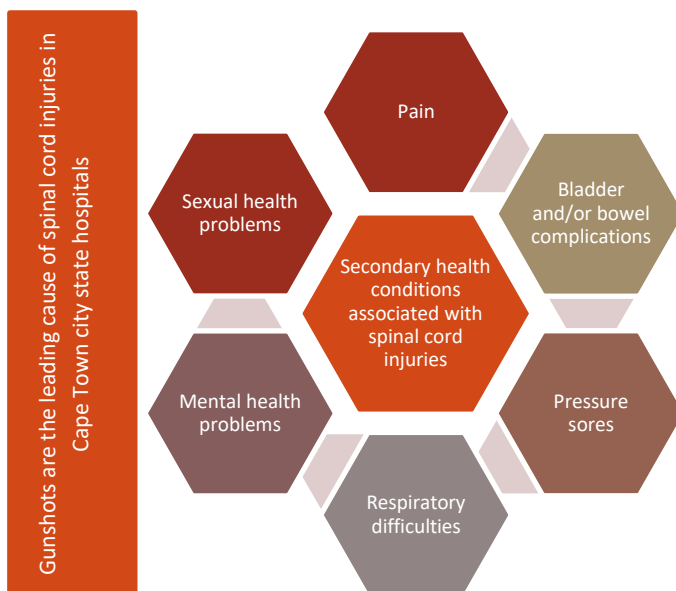
**Most murders result from interpersonal arguments:**

The majority of murders in SA are not crime-related, but result from arguments and misunderstandings (see Graph 3).<sup>4</sup> As firearms are designed to kill, the ready availability of guns increases the likelihood that an interpersonal dispute will end in murder.



**Injury and disability**

Each day in SA as many as 180 people survive a gunshot, often with severe disabilities<sup>5</sup> following a penetrating injury to the brain, spinal cord or abdomen.



Traumatic spinal cord injury is one of the most devastating conditions known to humanity. While traffic injuries are the leading cause of traumatic spinal cord injuries worldwide,<sup>6</sup> including for patients treated at private healthcare facilities in Cape Town,<sup>7</sup> in 2014 gunshots overtook traffic injuries as the leading cause of spinal cord injuries in the City of Cape Town’s government hospitals.<sup>8</sup>

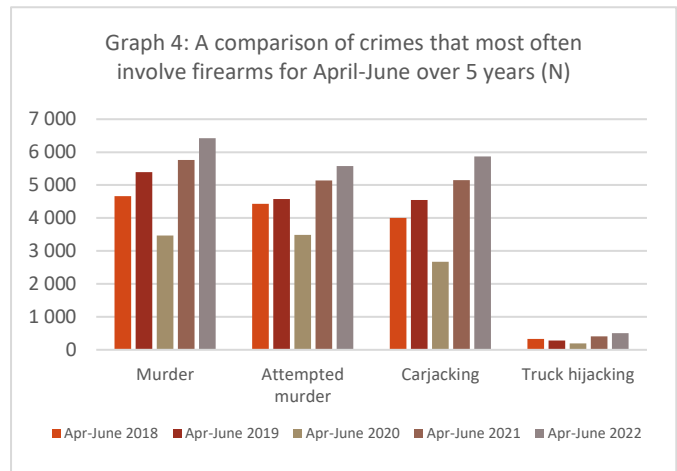
People with spinal cord injuries report a high prevalence of secondary health conditions, including pain, bladder and bowel complications, pressure sores, respiratory difficulties as well as mental health, sleep and sexual health problems.

<sup>3</sup> Faull, Andrew; et al. 2021. Lockdown lessons: Violence and policing in a pandemic. Southern Africa Report 44, March. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, p. 10.  
<sup>4</sup> The latest quarterly crime statistics for 1 April to 30 June 2022 include information on cause in 41% of murders. Source: South African Police Service. 2022. Police recorded crime statistics Republic of South Africa: First quarter of 2022/2023 financial year (April and June 2022).  
<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive global study on gun violence and disability estimates that for every person shot and killed as many as six victims will survive, often with severe disabilities. Source: Buchanan, Cate. (Editor). 2013. Gun Violence, Disability and Recovery. Sydney: Surviving Gun Violence Project.  
<sup>6</sup> Bickenbach, Jerome (Editor). 2013. International Perspectives on Spinal Cord Injury. World Health Organization, p. 20.  
<sup>7</sup> Phillips, J.; et al. 2018. Another piece to the epidemiological puzzle of traumatic spinal cord injury in Cape Town, South Africa: A population-based study. South African Medical Journal, Vol. 108, No. 12, pp. 1051-1054.  
<sup>8</sup> Joseph, C.; et al. 2015. Incidence and aetiology of traumatic spinal cord injury in Cape Town, South Africa: a prospective, population-based study. Spinal Cord, Vol. 53, pp. 692–696.

A recent study in South Africa found that 94% of patients with traumatic spinal cord injury experienced secondary health complications, with 25% experiencing five or more problems.<sup>9</sup> In addition to quality of life implications, this finding highlights the long-term impact of traumatic spinal cord injuries on South Africa's health and social services.



## Other gun crime

While murder in SA most often involves a gun, other crimes such as attempted murder, carjacking and truck hijacking are also more likely to involve firearms. As shown in Graph 4,<sup>10</sup> which tracks data from 1 April to 30 June, these crimes have steadily increased over the past five years, except during Covid-19 lockdowns.



## Gendered nature of gun violence

Gun violence affects men and women differently:

	<p>89% of gun murder victims are men.<sup>12</sup></p> <p>Men aged between 30-44 years are the most likely victims of gun violence, followed by teenage boys and young men aged 15-29 years.<sup>13</sup></p> <p>Men living in the Western Cape are the most at risk of being shot and killed (42%), followed by Gauteng (41%) and KwaZulu-Natal (35%).<sup>14</sup></p>		<p>11% of gun murder victims are women.<sup>16</sup></p> <p>Most victims have been threatened with a gun before being shot.<sup>17</sup></p> <p>Intimate partner murder-suicide is particularly high in families where men use a gun for work, such as in the police, army or private security industry.<sup>18</sup></p>
<p><b>The face of gun violence is a young black man living in a metro area<sup>11</sup></b></p>		<p><b>Women are most at risk of being shot in their intimate partner<sup>15</sup></b></p>	

<sup>9</sup> Pilusa, S.; and J. Potterton. 2021. Secondary health conditions in people with spinal cord injury in South Africa: Prevalence and associated factors. South African Medical Journal Vol. 111, No. 12, pp. 1211-1217.

<sup>10</sup> South African Police Service. 2022. First Quarter Crime Statistics 2022/2023.

<sup>11</sup> Matzopoulos, Richard; et al. 2015. Injury-related mortality in South Africa: a retrospective descriptive study of postmortem investigations. Bulletin of the World Health Organisation, Vol. 93, pp. 303-313.

<sup>12</sup> Prinsloo, Megan; et al. 2021. The 2nd injury mortality survey: A national study of injury mortality levels and causes in South Africa in 2017. Cape Town: South African Medical Research Council.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Women's vulnerability to a gun in the home confirmed by international research: A number of sources are cited in Shaw, Margaret. 2013. Chapter 2: Too Close to Home – Guns and Intimate Partner Violence. Small Arms Survey 2013. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. SA research confirms this risk, see Abrahams, Naemah; et al. 2010. Guns and Gender-based Violence in South Africa. South African Medical Journal, Vol. 100, No. 9, pp. 586-588.

<sup>16</sup> Prinsloo, Megan; et al. 2021. The 2nd injury mortality survey: A national study of injury mortality levels and causes in South Africa in 2017. Cape Town: South African Medical Research Council.

<sup>17</sup> Geneva Declaration Secretariat. 2011. Chapter 4: When the Victim is a Woman. Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011: Lethal Encounters. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Mathews, S.; et al. 2008. Intimate femicide-suicide in South Africa: a cross-sectional study. Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Vol. 86, No. 7, pp. 552-558.

## Gun violence costs billions

In 2014 an estimated R6 billion (4% of South Africa's National Health Budget) was spent treating gunshot injured patients at state hospitals nationally; accounting for inflation this is +/-R9.3 billion as of October 2022.<sup>19</sup> This figure only includes medical treatment costs, and excludes other direct and indirect costs:

- **Direct costs** are the hard costs resulting after someone is shot and killed or injured, and include emergency transport, medical care in hospital and post-discharge, and costs associated with the criminal justice system (police, courts and prisons).
- **Indirect costs** include potential wages and household productivity that are lost by victims/survivors and perpetrators, costs to the employer and quality of life costs, which estimate the financial value of the pain, suffering, and fear that accompany a death or injury.
- **Other costs** include losses resulting from 'brain drain' emigration as skilled South Africans relocate to safer countries, as well as the negative impacts on investment as potential investors are deterred by the risk of violent crime in South Africa.

## Tackling South Africa's gun violence epidemic

A recent scientific study confirms what South Africa must do to tackle its gun violence epidemic. The study is from Colombia in South America, which has income levels similar to South Africa and a comparably inefficient and corrupt policing system.<sup>20</sup> In 2012, Colombia's two largest cities, Bogotá and Medellín, banned people from carrying guns in public.

The 2020 study<sup>21</sup> which compared Bogotá and Medellín with seven control cities which continued to allow public gun carrying, was able to quantify the impact of the gun carrying ban. It found that:

- Colombia as a whole saw a decrease in gun-related murder following the prohibition on gun carrying in Bogotá and Medellín; and
- While gun death rates had been similar across all cities prior to 2012, reductions were two times greater in Bogotá and Medellín.

Overall, the authors estimate that the prohibition on gun carrying in Bogotá and Medellín saved about 30 lives every month in those two cities. They also estimate that a further 45 lives could have been saved each month if similar restrictions were implemented in the seven control cities.

## The principle of limits

At the core of Colombia's success in saving lives from gun violence is the principle of limits, which has been researched extensively by US criminologist Franklin Zimring. In his decades' long work, Zimring notes that firearms are many times more deadly than other weapons, e.g. gun assaults are seven times more likely to kill than all other kinds of criminal assault, and about five times more deadly than knife assaults, which is the next most frequent and deadly weapon used in criminal attacks.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> van As, Sebastian. 2014. Gun violence: What it costs the body, and our country. Daily Maverick, 20 March. (Online). Available at [www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-03-20-gun-violence-what-it-costs-the-body-and-our-country/](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-03-20-gun-violence-what-it-costs-the-body-and-our-country/) (accessed 24 November 2020), citing Allard, Denis, and V. Buich. 2005. The cost of treating serious abdominal firearm-related injuries in South Africa. *South African Medical Journal*, Vol. 95, No. 8, pp. 591-594. The figure of R9.3 billion was calculated using Inflation Adjustment Calculator.

<sup>20</sup> Copelyn, Jesse. 2022. These gun laws saved 30 lives a month in two big cities. Here's what it could mean for SA. Bhekisisa, 2 September. (Online). Available at <https://bhekisisa.org/health-news-south-africa/2022-09-02-gun-violence-and-deaths-increase-when-people-are-allowed-to-carry-guns-for-self-defence/> (accessed 14 October 2022). Article also summarises various studies and South Africa's experience which show the positive impact of limiting access to firearms.

<sup>21</sup> Vecino-Ortiz, Andres; et al. 2020. Gun-carrying restrictions and gun-related mortality, Colombia: a difference-in-difference design with fixed effects. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, Vol. 98, pp. 170-176. (Online). Available at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7047021/pdf/BLT.19.236646.pdf](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7047021/pdf/BLT.19.236646.pdf) (accessed 14 October 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Zimring, Franklin; et al. 1997. *Crime is not the problem: Lethal violence in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

According to Zimring, the purpose of firearms control is to i) reduce the use of firearms in crime and ii) reduce the death rate from crime.

While firearms control policies across the world have different strategies to reduce firearm-related crime and death, all can be categorised into one of three approaches, which entail the principle of limiting the:<sup>23</sup>

- *types* of firearms and ammunition
- *users* of firearms and ammunition
- *uses* of firearms and ammunition

In 2021, SA's Civilian Secretariat for Police Service published a draft amendment to the Firearms Control Act<sup>24</sup> which included a range of measures to limit the types, users and uses of firearms and ammunition. Clause 15, which proposes repealing section 13: Firearms for self-defence and section 14: Restricted firearms for self-defence is a powerful example of effecting the principle of limits by prohibiting firearms for defensive use.

While existing global evidence confirms the rationality of Clause 15 by showing that guns are not effective for self-defence and that a gun in the home increases risk to the household and country at large,<sup>25</sup> a new study from the USA shows that states that weakened limits on self-defensive gun use saw increases in gun murder rates: Between 2000 and 2016, 23 US states enacted Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws which allow individuals to use deadly force even when there is an option to safely retreat from a potentially dangerous situation. Using 18 US states which did not have SYG laws as a comparison, the researchers concluded that the adoption of SYG laws in these 23 states "was associated with increases in violent deaths, deaths that could potentially have been avoided."<sup>26</sup> In other words, weakening limits on the use of firearms increased gun-related deaths.

South Africa's own experience highlights how the principle of limits can save lives: When access to firearms was reduced through a range of gun control interventions coinciding with the Firearms Control Act (2000), South Africa saw a halving of our gun death rate – from 34 people shot and killed a day in 1998 to 18 a day in 2009.

See [Gun Control and Violence: South Africa's Story](#)

## Conclusion

South Africa's gun violence epidemic kills 30 people a day, injures 180 more, and costs the country billions of rands in direct and indirect costs, including investment losses. Our response to this epidemic needs to be grounded in facts, including that:

- Gun-related murders correlate to gun availability and are not affected by alcohol bans, limits on freedom of movement or intensified policing as was seen under Covid-19 lockdowns;
- Most murders in South Africa result from interpersonal arguments; so while reducing the availability of guns will not make South Africans less violent, it will reduce the lethality of disputes; and
- The principle of limits is a powerful and practical strategy to reduce gun violence, and, if used to inform amendments to the Firearms Control Act, can help make South Africa a safer more secure country for everyone, including residents, businesses and investors.

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<sup>23</sup> Zimring, Franklin. 2004. Firearms, violence, and the potential impact of firearms control. *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, Vol. 32, pp. 34-37.

<sup>24</sup> Draft Firearms Control Amendment Bill. 2021. (Online). Available at [www.gov.za/documents/firearms-control-amendment-bill-draft](http://www.gov.za/documents/firearms-control-amendment-bill-draft) (accessed 10 June 2022).

<sup>25</sup> GfSA. 2022. Gun control, self-defence and public safety. *Firearms Control Briefing 2*, 15 June. (Online). Available at <https://gfsa.org.za/2022/06/15/briefing-2-of-2022-gun-control-self-defence-and-public-safety/>

<sup>26</sup> Degli Esposti, Michelle; et al. 2022. Analysis of "Stand Your Ground" Self-defense Laws and Statewide Rates of Homicides and Firearm Homicides. *JAMA Network Open*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 1.