

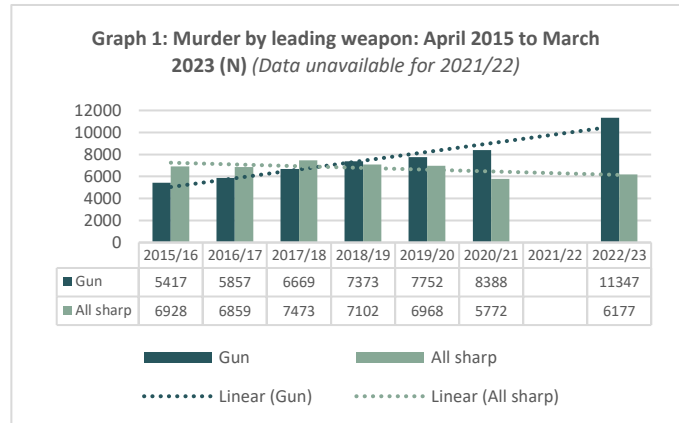
Elections 2024: Arming you with the facts about Gun crime and illegal guns

Introduction

Most political parties don't mention gun control in their election manifestos, even though guns are the leading weapon used in murder and attempted murder. The few parties that do mention guns claim the solution to violent crime is to deal with illegal guns while supporting responsible gun ownership. Are they right?

Gun violence in SA

As shown in Graph 1¹, the number of people murdered with a gun has more than doubled over the past eight years, from 5,417 murders in 2015/16 (when 29% of the 18,673 murders that year were from gunshot) to 11,347 murders in 2022/23 (when 41% of 27,494 murders were gunshot).² As such, a priority for all political parties must be addressing gun-related crime.



Are illegal guns the problem?

Yes: By their nature illegal guns are outside of any control, which makes them highly valued by criminals. Most gun-related crime in SA is committed with illegal guns, thus a key focus of political parties must be the recovery and destruction of illegal guns already in circulation. This is important because guns don't expire but keep moving within the criminal underworld e.g. one of the awaiting destruction guns stolen from a police weapons store by a corrupt cop has been linked to 15 murders.³

No: Legal guns are also used illegally to commit various crimes. Legal guns are also the biggest source of illegal guns in SA – see below.

Where do crime guns come from?

There are 2 sources of guns used to commit crime in SA:

Source 1: Legal gun stocks

Legal guns owned by the state and civilians are the biggest source of crime guns in SA. There are 3 ways that legal guns feed gun-related crime in SA:

1. Loss/theft: Legal guns owned by civilians and the state are the biggest source of illegal guns in SA. As Table 1 shows, in the three years between 2020/21 and 2022/23 (when no data are missing) civilians reported the loss/theft of 16,486 guns to the police (though this is an underestimate as people may not report for fear of being charged with negligence); in comparison, the SA Police Service (SAPS), SA National Defence Force and Correctional Services reported the loss/theft of 2,381 guns of which 85% were service guns lost by/stolen from police members.

Year	Civilian-owned ⁴	SAPS service ⁵	SAP13 evidence stores ⁶	SA National Defence Force ⁷	Correctional Services ⁸
2018/19	9 002	607			
2019/20	8 007	672		25	1
2020/21	5 332	566	179	12	4
2021/22	2 913	712	130	4	4
2022/23	8 241	742	21	5	2
2023/24			27 (6 months)	6 (9 months)	7 (9 months)
Totals	33 495	3 299	357	52	18

2. *Fraud/corruption*: Individuals or companies that do not qualify for gun ownership are granted firearm licences or permits fraudulently. High profile cases involving the police, businesses and individuals are summarised below:

Central Firearms Registry (CFR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CFR head fired for firearm licence fraud and corruption⁹ – CFR police officers arrested for selling fraudulent firearm licences to gang leaders¹⁰
Police officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Senior police officer sentenced to 18 years for selling guns ‘destroyed’ by police to gangsters¹¹ – 17 police officers, including two brigadiers, arrested for fraudulently issuing firearm licences to criminal gangs¹²
Accredited firearms training institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Police close illegal KZN firearms training academy¹³ – Journalist buys fake gun proficiency certificate¹⁴
Accredited firearms dealers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Hawks investigate one of SA’s biggest gun dealers for large-scale corruption¹⁵ – Durban gun dealer arrested for supplying guns to Terrible Josters gang¹⁶ – Gqeberha gun dealer arrested for leaking 76 guns to criminals, and failing to account for a further 437 guns¹⁷
Special category gun owners	<p>Sports-shooters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Gangsters accumulate ammunition using sports shooting firearm licences, which allow them to “buy as much ammunition as they want”¹⁸ <p>Private security companies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Private security company issues firearm permits to known gang leader¹⁹

3. *Criminal use*: Legal guns are also used to commit crimes e.g. intimate partner murder-suicides are typically committed with a licensed firearm,²⁰ while private security companies operating within SA’s minibus-taxi industry have been shown to use legally acquired guns to conduct illegal operations on behalf of taxi mafias.²¹

Source 2: *Illegal gun stocks*

While most crime guns in SA are sourced from legal stocks, illegal stocks are also a source of some crime guns:

1. *Smuggled*: Common under apartheid, the number of guns smuggled into SA has decreased significantly.²² For instance, police statistics show a decline in the number of illegal firearms seized at ports of entry since 2009/10 (when 179 illegal guns were recovered), with 79 illegal firearms recovered in 2022/23.²³ Moreover, arms caches of guns smuggled into the country under apartheid would now be relatively old and, unless stored and maintained, would no longer be effective. While some of these guns may still be in use, there has been a gradual shift to more modern firearms, which are now playing a more prominent role.²⁴

2. *Illegally manufactured*: Including homemade or craft guns these are guns that are manufactured outside of any controls²⁵ and include firearms that have been adapted e.g. SA is seeing an increase in blank fire guns, with concerns that they can be converted to fire live ammunition.²⁶

What is the solution?

In addition to ensuring that those who break the law are prosecuted, two interventions are needed to deal with crime guns in SA:

1. Recover and destroy the existing pool of illegal guns: While police stop and search operations (like Operation Shanela) recover some guns, intelligence-led operations are far more effective. GfSA has repeatedly called for specialised firearms units to be established to undertake focused gun-recovery operations; no-questions-asked amnesties are also an effective strategy to recover illegal guns.
2. Tighten controls of legal stocks to stop leakage and criminal use: Actions include amending the Firearms Control Act to close loopholes, ensuring that all gun owners are licensed under the Firearms Control Act, undertaking regular audits of all gun and ammunition stocks and ensuring that obsolete and excess firearms and ammunition rounds are destroyed.

Summary and conclusion

Although most gun-related crime in SA is committed with illegal guns, the biggest source of crime guns are legal guns owned by civilians and the state. While recovering and destroying illegal guns is necessary, the only way to effectively deal with SA's gun-crime problem is to tighten controls over legal stocks to stop legal guns both leaking into criminal hands and being criminally used.

Elections 24: Arm yourself with the facts about gun violence and gun control

This info sheet is part of a series developed by Gun Free South Africa for Elections 24, helping you assess:

- Where does your party stand on gun control?
- Does your party have a plan to combat the rising levels of gun violence in SA?
- Does your party believe in arming citizens as a form of self-defence?
- What is your party's position on illegal guns, and how do they plan to stop the legal guns becoming crime guns?

Also read: • [Gun control to reduce crime](#) • [Guns for self-defence](#)

Make your vote count!

¹ Source of figures in Graph 1:

- Gun, knife and other sharp object murders for 2015/16 and 2016/17: National Police Commissioner. 2019. Reply to question 15 from Dr PJ Groenewald (FF+), 7 February. (Online). Available at <https://static.pmg.org.za/RNW15-190322.docx> (accessed 6 May 2024).
- Gun, knife and other sharp object murders for 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21: Minister of Police. 2021. Reply to question 1637 from Dr PJ Groenewald (FF+), 4 June. (Online) Available at <https://static.pmg.org.za/RNW1637-2021-06-25.docx> (accessed 6 May 2024).
- Gun, knife and other sharp object murders for 2022/23 sourced from South African Police Service presentations on quarterly annual crime statistics. Available at https://www.saps.gov.za/services/older_crimestats.php (accessed 6 May 2024).

² Total murders sourced from South African Police Service annual and quarterly crime statistics. Available at https://www.saps.gov.za/services/older_crimestats.php (accessed 6 May 2024).

³ De Wee, Maygene. 2016. Moordpad van één gesteelde pistol: 15 mense doodgeskiet binne 'n paar maande. Beeld, 16 July.

⁴ South African Police Service Annual Reports.

⁵ South African Police Service Annual Reports.

⁶ National Police Commissioner. 2024. Reply to question 4008 from Dr PJ Groenewald (FF+), 5 January.

⁷ Minister of Defence and Military Veterans. 2024. Reply to question 4007 from Dr PJ Groenewald (FF+), 5 January.

⁸ Minister of Justice and Correctional Services. 2023. Reply to question 4006 from Dr PJ Groenewald (FF+), 17 November.

⁹ Serrao, Angelique. 2014. Top cop axed over gun saga. The Star, 7 April.

¹⁰ Cruywagen, Vincent. 2019. Alleged 28s gang boss loses bid to have confiscated firearms returned. Cape Argus, 5 December.

¹¹ Mzantsi, Siyavuya. 2016. Former top cop jailed for illegal gun trade. Cape Times, 22 June.

¹² IOL Reporter. 2020. Police brigadiers charged over firearm licence racket released on R3 000 bail. IOL, 28 October.

¹³ Daily News Reporters. 2015. Police swoop on firearm training academy. Daily News, 23 January.

¹⁴ SABC. 2016. SABC exposes the fraudulent sale of firearm proficiency certificates. SABC, 22 February.

¹⁵ Serrao, Angelique, and Solly Maphumulo. 2013. Firearm shop suspects nabbed at airport. The Star, 12 July.

¹⁶ Evans, Jenni. 2021. Durban firearms dealer charged with multiple murders in Cape Town. News24, 15 February.

¹⁷ Williams, Lynn. 2024. IO comes guns blazing at Karen Webb bail hearing. AlgoaFM. (Online). Available at <https://www.algoafm.co.za/local/io-comes-guns-blazing-at-karen-webb-bail-hearing> (accessed 23 February 2024).

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- ¹⁸ Dolley, Caryn. 2015. Gangs exploit firearm loophole. Weekend Argus, 12 April.
- ¹⁹ Dolley, Caryn. 2020. Gun-running cops, guards and thugs. Daily Maverick, 7 November.
- ²⁰ Abrahams, Naeemah. et al. 2022. Decrease in femicide in South Africa: three national studies across 18 years. Research Brief. Pretoria: South African Medical Research Council. (Online). Available at <https://www.samrc.ac.za/reports/research-brief-decrease-femicide-south-africa-three-national-studies-across-18-years> (accessed 6 May 2024).
- ²¹ Irish-Qhobosheane, Jenni. 2021. How to silence the guns? Southern Africa’s illegal firearms markets. Geneva: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (Online). Available at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/GITOC-ESA-Obs-How-to-silence-the-guns-Southern-Africas-illegal-firearms-markets.pdf> (accessed 6 May 2024).
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ South African Police Service 2022-2023 Annual Report.
- ²⁴ Irish-Qhobosheane, Jenni. 2021. How to silence the guns? Southern Africa’s illegal firearms markets. Geneva: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (Online). Available at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/GITOC-ESA-Obs-How-to-silence-the-guns-Southern-Africas-illegal-firearms-markets.pdf> (accessed 6 May 2024).
- ²⁵ Vecchioni, Matilde, and Sanem Topal. 2024. Unregulated: Examining the global proliferation of craft-produced weapons. Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research. (Online). Available at <https://unidir.org/publication/unregulated-examining-the-global-proliferation-of-craft-produced-weapons/> (accessed 13 May 2024).
- ²⁶ Masson, Eunice. 2023. Shooting blanks a popular choice for gangsters. Mail & Guardian, 4 September. (Online). Available at <https://mg.co.za/news/2023-09-04-shooting-blanks-a-popular-choice-for-gangsters/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

