



Arming you with the facts about GUNS FOR SELF-DEFENCE

Introduction

In the current context of high and rising levels of [crime](#) and [ineffective policing](#) we can expect [more guns to be bought](#) for self-defence. Although guns are now the leading weapon used in murder and attempted murder,¹ gun control is rarely recognised as a key intervention to address gun-related violence. Instead attempts to control guns are countered with claims that citizens have a ‘right’ to own and/or use a gun and that guns are necessary and effective for self-defence.

Are guns effective for self-defence?

While gun lobby groups use hearsay and opinion to claim that guns are effective for self-protection; the data from South Africa and globally show that having a gun increases risk for the gun owner, their family, and the wider community.

South African research

Quantitative research undertaken in two Johannesburg police precincts shows that an armed victim of crime is 4 times more likely to be *shot at* if they use their gun in self-defence.² While this study dates to 1999, no further SA-based research has been done to refute it and its findings are confirmed by international research (see below).

In a second study, 30 perpetrators jailed for aggravated robbery were interviewed.³ It found that in 97% of cases perpetrators used handguns (as they are easy to conceal) and threatened violence when entering a home to overcome resistance. It also found that most serious injuries and deaths occur during the initial phase of a robbery and are often linked to attempts by victims to resist attackers, with all perpetrators in the study reporting that they would rather shoot a person than expose themselves to risk of injury during a robbery.

The findings of this qualitative study are amplified in a new study undertaken by the University of the Witwatersrand, University of Cape Town and Medical Research Council which looks at robbery-related murders in South Africa.⁴ The study analysed almost 69,000 robberies in which force was used that were reported to the police between 2003 and 2014 to identify the risk factors that escalate robbery into murder. It shows that while robbery-homicide is relatively rare, the increased risk of being killed in a robbery can be linked to victims who are older white men and to the likelihood that victims are armed and resist attack.

In addition to the risk of being shot at, injured, or even murdered when trying to use a gun in self-defence, a further risk is that a gun bought for self-defence arms a criminal:

- Police reports consistently show that civilians are the biggest source of lost/stolen guns: In [2022-23](#) civilians reported the loss/theft of 8,241 guns to the police (which is an under-estimate as some people

Is gun ownership a right in SA?

Gun ownership is not a right in South Africa: In 2020 the [Supreme Court of Appeal](#) ruled that, “*the core premise of the gun control regime [in South Africa] is that gun ownership is not a fundamental right under the Bill of Rights, but a privilege regulated by the law under the Act.*”

¹ South African Police Service 2023-24 national crime statistics for [quarter 1](#), [quarter 2](#) and [quarter 3](#).

² Altbeker, Antony. 1999. Guns and Public Safety: Gun crime in Alexandra and Bramley. Johannesburg: GfSA. To note: The gun lobby repeatedly deflects this point by claiming that Africa Check has debunked this claim. In fact, the claim Africa Check researched was that you are *4 times more likely to have your gun used against you* than be able to use it successfully in self-defence. The claim was made by Gun Safe Cities in 2019, and [Africa Check](#) found – correctly – that there is no evidence to support it.

³ Zinn, Rudolph. 2016. Home Invasion - Robbers Disclose What You Should Know. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

⁴ Bowman, Brett, Sherianne Kramer, Sulaiman Salau, and Richard Matzopoulos. 2022. Trends, Correlates, and Contexts of Robbery-Homicide in South Africa. *Journal of Homicide Studies*, January, pp. 1-25.



may not report a loss/theft for fear of being charged with negligence) while SAPS reported the loss/theft of 742 guns in this period. Over the last 20 years civilians lost an average of 7 guns for every 1 gun lost/stolen by the police.⁵

- Using the most recent information available, research undertaken by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime shows that legal firearms held by civilians and the state are the biggest source of illegal firearms in South Africa.⁶
- South African research undertaken in two Johannesburg police precincts shows that a gun owner is 4 times more likely to have their gun stolen than to use it in self-defence when being attacked.⁷
- South African research on robbery-related murder shows that firearms are more frequently stolen in and associated with robbery cases where the victim is killed.⁸

International research

Research in the USA shows that a victim of crime is 4 to 5 times more likely to be *shot* (not just *shot at* as South African research has shown) if they have a gun in their possession when attacked, compared to someone not carrying a firearm at the time.⁹

Gun owners also have a higher risk of being violently victimised than non-gun owners: An analysis of research from 26 countries shows that even after risk factors for victimisation (such as age, gender, income and educational level) are controlled for, owning a handgun remains a risk factor.¹⁰ A possible explanation is that carrying a gun results in an 'illusion of invincibility', which leads to risk-taking or provocative behaviour by a gun owner which in turn increases their risk of being victimised.¹¹

Summary and conclusion

Although guns are the leading weapon used in violent crime in South Africa, there is little attention given to the importance of gun control as crime control. Instead, hearsay and opinion are used by the gun lobby to perpetuate the myth that gun ownership is a right and that guns are effective for self-defence. The facts are that:

1. South Africa's Supreme Court of Appeal has ruled that gun ownership is not a right, but a privilege.
2. Research, including published peer reviewed research in South Africa and globally, has repeatedly shown that firearms are not effective for self-defence but increase the risk of injury or death and the loss/theft of a gun.

⁵ South African Police Service Annual Reports from 2000-01 to 2020-21, hard copies and available online at www.saps.gov.za.

⁶ Irish-Qhobosheane, Jenni. 2021. How to silence the guns? Southern Africa's illegal firearms markets. Geneva: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

⁷ Altbeker, Antony. 1999. Guns and Public Safety: Gun crime in Alexandra and Bramley. Johannesburg: GFSA.

⁸ Bowman, Brett, Sherianne Kramer, Sulaiman Salau, and Richard Matzopoulos. 2022. Trends, Correlates, and Contexts of Robbery-Homicide in South Africa. *Journal of Homicide Studies*, January, pp. 1-25.

⁹ Branas, Charles, Therese Richmond, Dennis Culhane, Thomas Ten Have, and Douglas Wiebe. 2009. Investigating the Link Between Gun Possession and Gun Assault. *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 99, No. 11, pp. 2034-2040.

¹⁰ van Kesteren, John. 2014. Revisiting the gun ownership and violence link. *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 54, pp. 53-72.

¹¹ Ibid.