

**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# HOW TO SILENCE THE GUNS?

Southern Africa's illegal  
firearms markets



JENNI IRISH-QHOBOSHEANE

SEPTEMBER 2021





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## Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>CDSO</b>	Chief Directorate of Special Operations (South Africa)
<b>DDR</b>	Demilitarization, demobilization and reintegration
<b>FADM</b>	Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (Forças Armadas de Defesa de Moçambique)
<b>FRELIMO</b>	Mozambique Liberation Front (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique)
<b>IBIS</b>	Integrated Ballistics Identification System (South Africa)
<b>PSIRA</b>	Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (South Africa)
<b>RENAMO</b>	Mozambican National Resistance (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana)
<b>SABRIC</b>	South African Banking Risk Information Centre
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>SANDF</b>	South African National Defence Force
<b>SAPS</b>	South African Police Service
<b>SSA</b>	State Security Agency (South Africa)
<b>ZANLA</b>	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (the armed wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union)
<b>ZIPRA</b>	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (the armed wing of the Zimbabwe African People's Union)



Rhodesian security forces about to leave on patrol along the Mozambican border, April 1979.


© Pierre Haski/AFP via Getty Images



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Soldiers from the Mozambican army on patrol in Mocimboa da Praia, a key port seized by Islamist insurgents in August 2020. © Adrien Barbier/AFP via Getty Images





**O**n the African continent, the availability of illicit firearms has helped to fuel violence and conflict, with these weapons being used in conflict situations as well as by organized crime networks and other criminal elements.

At its 29th summit in July 2017, the African Union (AU) declared that it would be implementing its Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by 2020. Under this declaration, the month of September each year would become an Africa amnesty month for the surrender and collection of illicit firearms. While this roadmap was scheduled to end in 2020, there are discussions taking place within the AU member states to extend it for a further 10 years.

In September 2020, the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui, issued a statement emphasizing the need for the organization to redouble its efforts to address the proliferation of illicit firearms on the continent, highlighting the serious threat these pose to peace, governance and development.<sup>1</sup> The statement stressed the need to 'ask ourselves how many of these unregistered weapons have been collected, whether within the framework of the Amnesty Month, or through other national disarmament programmes'.<sup>2</sup>

Research done in 2017 by the international organization Small Arms Survey estimated that there were 40 million firearms in the possession of civilians across the continent. The organization says that about 5.8 million of these weapons were officially registered and about 16 million unregistered. The status of the remaining 18 million-plus weapons was listed as being unclear.<sup>3</sup>

Within the southern African region, the three countries under study, South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, accounted for just over one-fifth of the unregistered firearms identified by the survey. These countries not only house a significant number of illegal firearms, but the illicit weapons trade across the three is intertwined because of their history. There are an estimated 3.8 million unregistered illegal firearms across these countries. South Africa has the largest pool of illegal firearms of the three, with an estimated 2.35 million such weapons,<sup>4</sup> followed by Mozambique, with an estimated 1.33 million unregistered firearms, and Zimbabwe, with an estimated 264 315 weapons.<sup>5</sup>

This report is based on research and fieldwork conducted in the three countries. Interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders and role players from governments, NGOs and individuals. The aim was to understand the details of the political economy of illicit firearm markets and how they are linked to conflict and organized crime. The report also attempts to map how the illicit economy operates, specifically addressing the sources, markets, types of firearms available, pricing of these goods as well as other factors that influence these economies.

While the report attempts to focus on identifying cross-cutting trends and issues, it also recognizes that there are differences that exist both in the sources and markets within the three countries and that some of the issues are very country specific.

Access to information across the states under review varied considerably, with information and data in South Africa being more accessible and updated compared to what is available in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In the latter two countries, the research relied heavily on interviews and information gathered from multiple sources, some of which was anecdotal in nature.

## Mapping the sources

The availability of illicit firearms in all three countries shows that this trend is influenced by a number of factors, including:

- The fact that firearms were distributed during political conflicts in each of these countries over the past three decades and attempts to retrieve them have had limited success, particularly in the cases of South Africa and Mozambique.
- Illicit cross border firearm trafficking, which has been fuelled largely by the availability of firearms distributed during conflicts and weaknesses in demobilization efforts from former conflicts.
- Firearms sourced domestically, which include the diversion of legal firearms held by civilians as well as those taken from government stocks, particularly from the police and army.

A critical aspect in the sourcing of firearms within the illicit economy is the availability of ammunition, which is accessed from both civilian and state sources.

Another development is the blurring of lines between the illicit firearm market and the legal market. This occurs in several ways, including:

- Mismanagement and corruption in the police's licensing process, which has enabled criminals to fraudulently purchase firearm licences.
- Private security operators using their legally licensed guns for illegal purposes.
- In Zimbabwe specifically, the sale of surplus state firearms to civilians for legal purposes, which are diverted to illegal activities.
- Police and army firearms that are rented out to criminals.

## Consumers of the illicit economy

The availability of illicit firearms plays a critical role not only in influencing the operations and modus operandi of organized crime gangs and networks, but also shaping how the illicit firearm economy itself operates. The illicit activities of

organized crime networks generate resources to buy firearms, which helps them to expand, protect and sustain the illicit economies that are their lifeblood.

Currently, there is a diverse range of criminal networks that are consumers in and of the illicit firearms market. Some are transnational in nature and operate across the three countries, while others are more country specific.

## **Illicit pricing**

Like all black-market trade, the illicit trade in firearms is subject to general issues of inflation and changes in market dynamics. For example, the price of illegal weapons varies according to factors such as the availability of stock, who is doing the selling and buying and the origin of the guns. Understanding how pricing works within the illicit economy is important. It not only helps observers to understand how these activities affect the legal market, it may also provide important insights into how the market varies in different places and possible reasons for this.

## **Key recommendations**


- In all three countries, it is essential that proper norms and standards regarding the safe management of firearms is addressed.
- The countries should put in place proper mechanisms for reporting lost firearms from all government departments that have such stocks.
- Adequate resources need to be allocated to investigate negligence or corruption in the loss of state firearms.
- There should be rigorous controls for the storage, sale and provision of ammunition, with strict enforcement of these controls.
- Organizations that investigate and deal with organized crime need to focus on the criminal activities of these groups and examine how they engage with the illicit-weapons economy in order to allocate resources accordingly.
- Governments need to allocate sufficient resources to relevant stakeholders to enable them to understand and track developments in different illicit markets involving firearms.



# INTRODUCTION

## COUNTING THE COST OF FIREARM VIOLENCE

Criminals in southern Africa have access to millions of illicit firearms to undertake their activities. Above, two cash vans are blown up by robbers in Boksburg, South Africa. © Felix Dlangamandla



**T**he Southern African Development Community (SADC) Council of Ministers first made a statement on the issue of preventing and combating illicit trafficking of firearms and related crimes in August 1999 at its meeting in Maputo, Mozambique. It noted that conflicts in the region had led to a proliferation of firearms, which had resulted in an increase in criminal activities, such as armed robberies.<sup>6</sup>

Since this meeting, countries in the SADC region have implemented important protocols, policies and instruments at both a regional and national level to address this issue. In March 2001, SADC heads of state adopted a protocol on the control of firearms, ammunition and other related materials. This aimed to prevent and eradicate the illicit manufacturing of firearms and ammunition as well as the accumulation, trafficking, possession and use of firearms. More recently, in August 2020, the SADC heads of state adopted a revised new protocol, which aims to address gaps and weaknesses in the 2001 protocol and provide countries with a more comprehensive framework for combating the proliferation of weapons.

Both the 2001 protocol and revised version address the need for SADC countries to implement systems to ensure the proper management of firearms, including those held by the state. The revised protocol also emphasizes effective measures that can be taken by member states regarding the safe management of firearms, including the stockpiling and maintenance of government firearms; keeping records of firearms that have been lost, stolen, recovered, seized and destroyed; and marking and tracking weapons held by the state.<sup>7</sup>

While the exact figure for the number of illicit firearms in circulation in the SADC region is not readily available, it is estimated that in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe the number is about 3.8 million.<sup>8</sup>

Of the three, South Africa has the largest pool of illicit firearms in circulation. The country also ranks 16th highest on the Global Peace Index for its high levels of violence. A 2018 Small Arms Survey report estimated that there are about 2.35 million illegal firearms in the hands of South African civilians.<sup>9</sup>

Between 1994 and 2000, an average of 34 people were shot and killed each day in South Africa. It declined to 18 people a day between 2000 and 2009, but the number has steadily increased since 2010. By 2018, firearms were responsible for the deaths of an average of 23 people a day, with an average of 138 people a day being wounded. Many of these injuries have resulted in severe disabilities.<sup>10</sup>

According to Gun Free South Africa, the 2018/19 national police crime statistics show that guns are overwhelmingly the weapon most used in South Africa to kill, injure, threaten and intimidate. This is evident in the fact that:

- 41.3 per cent of murders involved the use of a firearm.
- 80 per cent of attempted murders involved firearms.
- 83 per cent of car hijackings involved the use of at least one firearm.
- 59 per cent of residential robberies involved the use of firearms.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, in South Africa in July 2021, when widespread unrest, violence and looting broke out in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng following the arrest and incarceration of former President Jacob Zuma,<sup>12</sup> the issue of access to both firearms and ammunition was brought into sharp focus.

The unrest and looting that started in KwaZulu-Natal and soon spread to Gauteng resulted in damage to the economy estimated to be in the region of R35 billion.<sup>13</sup> The violence saw looters and community vigilante groups arming themselves, resulting in the deaths of more than 330 people.<sup>14</sup>

In KwaZulu-Natal, during the violence, police stations were placed on high alert over threats that they might be targeted by looters and other criminal elements for their arsenals of firearms.<sup>15</sup> In Phoenix, an urban area outside Durban, 22 people were arrested and police seized 152 firearms from private security companies operating in the area and another 112 illegal firearms from residents. The

arrests and seizures followed police investigations into the murder of 36 people in Phoenix. According to the police minister, Bheki Cele, 33 of these had been attacked by vigilantes manning roadblocks set up in response to the looting and arson attacks around the city.<sup>16</sup>

More than 1.2 million rounds of ammunition were looted in Durban. The ammunition, estimated to be worth over R3 million, was stolen from an unsecured privately owned container yard. This took place in a province that has witnessed for decades high levels of criminal and political violence. In 2018, the GI-TOC identified the province as accounting for 40% of all cases of assassinations in South Africa, including political killings, taxi hits as well as assassinations linked to organized crime activity. In June 2021, the police minister, commenting on political violence in the province, said that although he was pleased to have seen a reduction in the number of politically related murders in the KwaZulu-Natal, he believed the province was not in the clear yet: 'Political intolerance through intimidation and extortion still remains a cause for concern, especially as we approach local government elections in the coming months.'<sup>17</sup> There are now fears that the stolen ammunition may contribute to inflaming an already volatile situation in the province.

In Mozambique, the number of illicit firearms in circulation has declined since the early 1990s. However, the country still has an estimated 1.337 million firearms in civilian hands. Of these, just 7 000 are legally registered,<sup>18</sup> leaving more than 1.33 million unregistered guns in circulation. In 2014, it was reported that Mozambique's main opposition party, the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), had arms caches in five districts within Sofala province alone (Maringué, Gorongosa, Nhamatanda, Buzi and Chibavava) that were alleged to have been large enough to fully arm thousands of RENAMO fighters.<sup>19</sup>

Although there is currently no information available to show the number of deaths resulting from gunshots in Mozambique, statistics published by the legal medicine department of Maputo Central Hospital in 2003 showed that firearm-related injuries were the second most frequent external cause of death (8.8 per cent) in that hospital between 1994 and 2003.<sup>20</sup> A survey of Chimoio residents conducted in 2003 also showed that while most respondents believed the availability of firearms had

decreased, it appeared that the number of automatic weapons in circulation had increased, outnumbering the number of handguns in the community.<sup>21</sup>

A 2008 situational analysis into Mozambique's weapons risk mitigation conducted by the UN Development Programme found that the proliferation of illicit small arms in Mozambique, especially in the main urban centres, had become one of the main causes of insecurity for citizens and their assets.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, in 2010, the Mozambican attorney general said the illegal possession of firearms had become one of the major causes of crime in the country.<sup>23</sup> More recently, interviews conducted as part of this research suggest that armed robbers, drug dealers, poachers, hijackers, kidnappers and insurgents in the country are all able to access firearms with relative ease.

A recent development in Mozambique – the emergence in 2017 of what is believed to be an ISIS-linked insurgency in the northern Cabo Delgado province – has further compounded the problem of illicit firearms in Mozambique, resulting in a renewed proliferation of weapons in the area.

In Zimbabwe, in contrast to its two neighbours, the number of illicit guns available is relatively low. However, 2017 estimates indicated that of the estimated 455 000 firearms in the hands of civilians, the majority (264 315) were unregistered.<sup>24</sup> And although Zimbabwe has always had one of the lowest homicide rates in the world, data prepared by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency shows that, since 2011, there has been a steady increase in the number of murder cases. They increased by a significant 19 per cent between 2017 and first 11 months of 2018.<sup>25</sup>

As with Mozambique, current data on the number of firearm-related homicides is not available but data collected by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in 2010 shows that firearms accounted for 65.6 per cent of all homicides that occurred in the country.<sup>26</sup> As with Mozambique, illegal firearms have been linked to long-running political conflicts in Zimbabwe. In 2019, during a meeting of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, concerns were expressed about the arming of political militia within the country.<sup>27</sup>



Guns are overwhelmingly the weapon most used in South Africa to kill, injure, threaten and intimidate. © Julian Rademeyer




# FILLING THE POOL

## SOURCES OF ILLICIT FIREARMS

Weapons find their way into civilian hands from various sources, including political conflict, smuggling, and diversion of legal and state-owned firearms. © Shaun Swingler





**T**here are a variety of ways that the pool of illegal firearms in the three countries has increased. These include firearms distributed during and as a result of political conflicts, firearms smuggled across borders, weapons sourced from legal civilian firearm owners and those diverted from the state.

## Conflict and guns

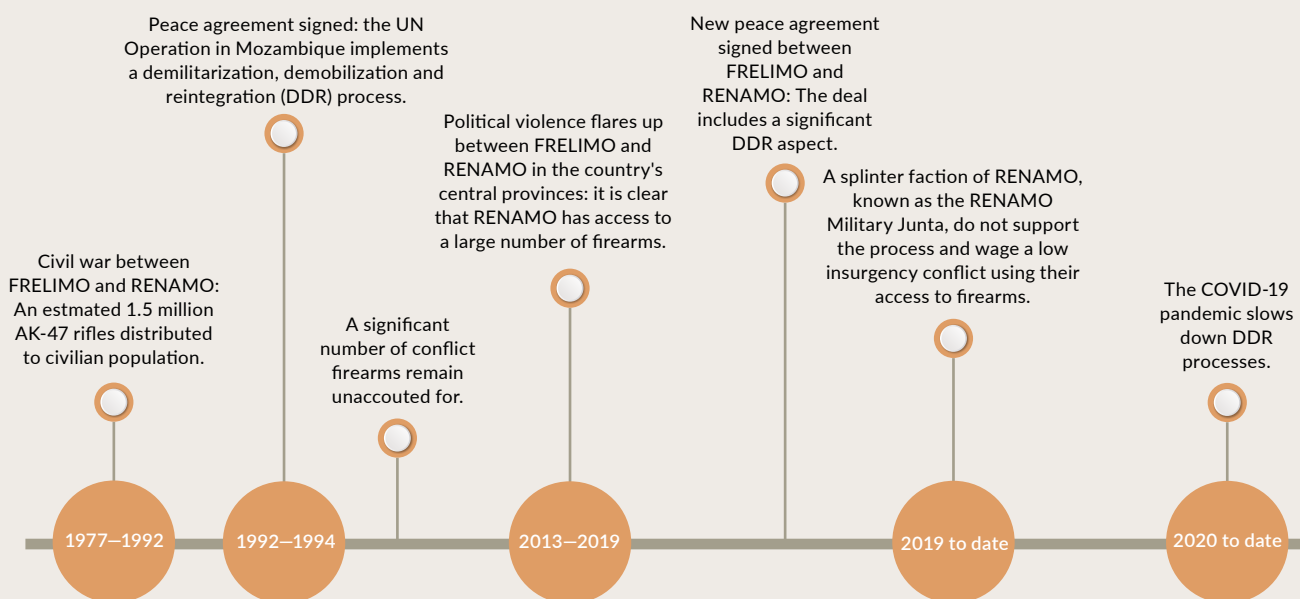
Historically, the availability of illicit firearms in all three countries has been influenced by political conflicts that have taken place in each of them over the past three decades.

In South Africa, as the struggle against apartheid intensified in the 1980s and into the 1990s, the demand for firearms grew. During this time, both the then South African Defence Force and the police provided many weapons to civilian groups believed to be aligned to the apartheid state.<sup>29</sup> In many instances, the police and army destroyed any records of these transfers immediately after they were done, making it almost impossible to trace the exact number of weapons distributed.<sup>29</sup> Firearms were also brought into the country by liberation forces.

As with the weapons distributed by the apartheid state, the exact number brought into the country by liberation forces is unknown,<sup>30</sup> but it is estimated to be anything between 20 tonnes and 10 000 weapons.<sup>31</sup> While, the weapons were brought in to support political agendas, many inevitably ended up with criminal groups. In December 1994, the government declared a one-day amnesty in an attempt to get civilians to hand weapons in their possession to the state. Only 900 firearms and 7 000 rounds of ammunition were secured during this amnesty.<sup>32</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain with any certainty how many of these conflict firearms are still part of the illicit pool of weapons in South Africa. However, most would now be relatively old and, unless stored and maintained, would no longer be effective. Indications are that, while some of these weapons may still be in use, over the past 15 years there has been a gradual shift from weapons from this era to more modern firearms, which now are playing a more prominent role in South Africa's illicit firearm economy.

In post-independence Mozambique, the protracted civil war between the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) party and opposition RENAMO forces led to significant inflows of firearms. This, coupled with a breakdown in the 1992 peace process, means many conflict firearms are likely to be in the hands of non-state actors.



**FIGURE 1** Mozambique's conflict and its impact on firearms.

Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980 after many years of fighting. The demobilization of the Rhodesian Security Forces and the armed wings of the main liberation parties, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), at assembly points was a protracted process and some firearms used during the conflict were not accounted for. Both ZANLA and ZIPRA were accused of retaining a portion of their personnel and weaponry outside of Zimbabwe during the ceasefire period, which formed part of the transition agreement.

Some of the missing firearms were used soon after the end of the liberation war in the five-year conflict in the province of Matabeleland, which began after the 1980 elections between the Zimbabwe African National Union and the Zimbabwe African People's Union, and claimed many civilians before a unity accord was signed in 1987. A limited number of weapons may have also made their way into the hands of criminal elements. However, unlike South Africa and Mozambique, Zimbabwe never really had a black market of any note for firearms.

This changed after 2000 when President Robert Mugabe began to consciously militarize different facets of society in Zimbabwe in an effort to bolster political support for his party in the face of the rise of a popular opposition movement.

This eroded the gains made from the disarmament process. Mugabe's strategy included the militarization of the police to create a militia within the ruling party, and 21 000 AK-47 rifles were imported from China for distribution to his party supporters. During the Zimbabwean presidential commission of inquiry into the shooting of civilians by the army during protests in August 2019, one witness testified that the ruling party had a long history of using the party's youth to terrorize opposition figures. According to this witness, some of these young people were provided with police and army uniforms as well as firearms.

## Cross-border trade

The Small Arms Survey and the African Union have identified the trafficking of firearms across borders in Africa as being an important source of illicit firearms on the continent.<sup>33</sup> This illicit trade involves both large consignments of firearms, arms and ammunition being transported or shipped into a particular area, or small numbers of firearms being smuggled across borders.<sup>34</sup>

The small-scale movement of firearms, often referred to as 'the ant trade', can involve a wide range of actors including local community members, local traders, government officials and organized criminal networks. Although this type of trade involves smaller numbers of firearms being transported across borders at any one time, it can also involve multiple transfers. Some of the actors may also be involved in broader smuggling activities, using the same routes and infrastructure to smuggle other commodities as well as firearms.<sup>35</sup>

Before 1994, firearm smuggling routes across South African borders were used mainly by political actors but after that, criminals began to take over some of these smuggling routes, particularly those along Mozambique's borders, which historically played a significant role in the smuggling of weapons into South Africa.<sup>36</sup> Initially this black market trade was about the sale of small numbers of firearms, often in exchange for food or other commodities, but it soon grew into an organized business.<sup>37</sup>

In 1995, the South African government, together with its Mozambican counterpart, launched Operation Rachel, which aimed to collect and destroy illegal weapons circulating in Mozambique. Speaking about the importance of the operation for South Africa, the country's then national commissioner of police, Jackie Selebi, said, 'The destruction of these arms caches in Mozambique, with the assistance of the South African Police, is part of our mandate to maintain law and order within South Africa.'<sup>38</sup>

Operation Rachel ran from 1996 to 2003, during which time 611 arms caches comprising more than 34 903 weapons and 11.4 million rounds of ammunition were found and destroyed. While most weapons seized during the programme were rifles, handguns, submachine guns and mortars were also among items seized.

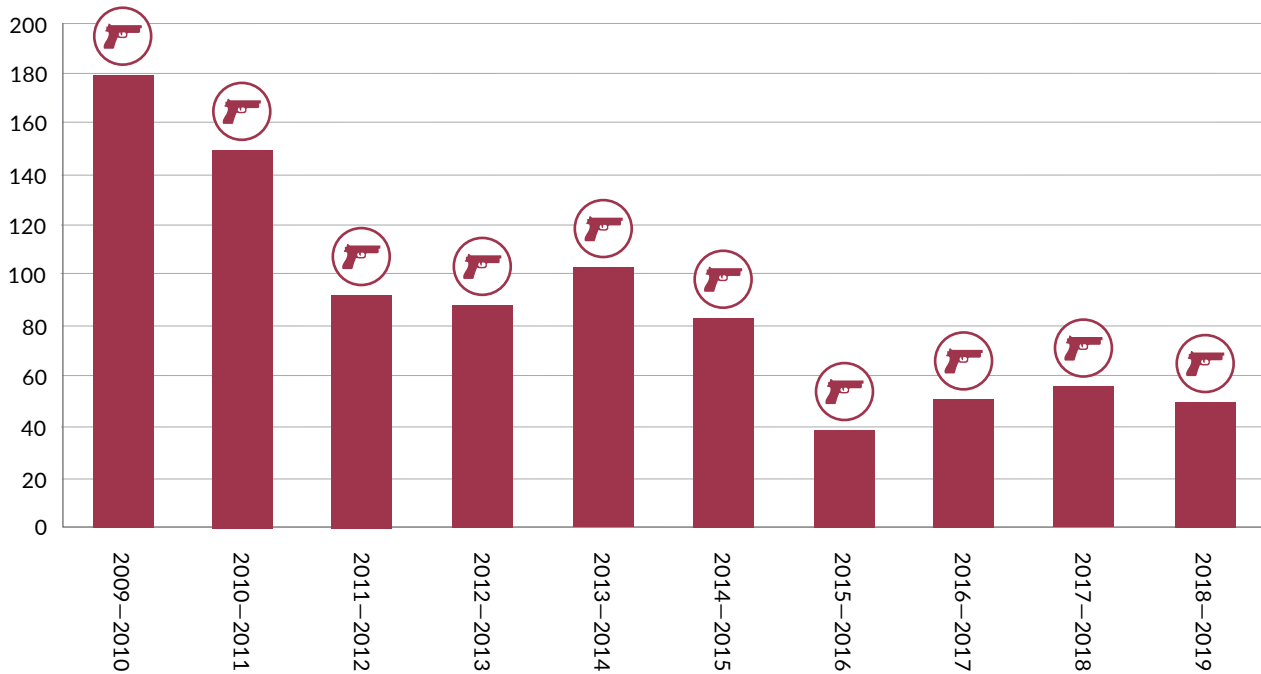
Weapon type	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	Total
Handguns	8	13	79	353	453	18	372	101	45	1 442
Submachine guns	91	68	980	735	1 874	126	467	346	235	4 922
Rifles	981	355	4 345	3 183	8 864	2 205	2 943	2 072	1 302	26 250
Light/heavy machine guns	47	52	279	467	845	66	148	47	1	1 952
Mortars	15	44	35	21	115	70	32	5	0	337
Ammunition	23 153	136 639	3 000 000	155 314	3 315 106	83 276	486 000	2 004 018	2 200 000	11 403 506

**FIGURE 2** Weapon types and numbers collected in Operation Rachel.

SOURCE: Frank James Tester, Art and disarmament: Turning arms into ploughshares in Mozambique, *Development in Practice*, 16, 2, April 2006, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4029877?seq=1>

*The trafficking of firearms across borders in Africa is an important source of illicit firearms on the continent.*

Whether as a result of such initiatives like Operation Rachel or due to other possible factors, by the late 1990s, the number of firearms being smuggled into South Africa decreased significantly. Police statistics show a decline in the number of illegal weapons seized at ports of entry since 2009/10.<sup>39</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Illegal firearms seized at ports of entry, 2009/10 to 2019.

SOURCE: SAPS Annual reports 2009/10 to 2018/19, <https://www.saps.gov.za/about/stratframework/annualreports.php>

Although South Africa was one of Mozambique’s most profitable destinations for its black-market firearm trade, weapons were also smuggled from Mozambique into other neighbouring countries including Zimbabwe and Malawi. In fact, over the years Mozambique developed a reputation for being a major source country for firearms smuggled into the region. However, in the five to 10 years up to 2020, this illicit trade had gradually declined. Although some smuggling is still taking place from Mozambique, the country itself has become a target for smuggled weapons from Tanzania and to a lesser extent, from South Africa.

Some of the wildlife poaching gangs operating in northern Mozambique have smuggled weapons into the country across its porous border with Tanzania. One example is that of Tanzanian national Mateso Albana Kasian and his alleged network. Kasian ran up to seven elephant poaching gangs in southern Tanzania until 2013 when he relocated his operations to northern Mozambique. The Kasian network was not only involved in poaching but was also alleged to have moved weapons across the Tanzanian–Mozambican border for its own use. In July 2017, Kasian was arrested by Mozambique’s national criminal investigation service (Serviço Nacional de Investigação Criminal) and was subsequently deported to Tanzania.<sup>40</sup>

There are more recent allegations that the Cabo Delgado insurgents that have occupied parts of northern Mozambique have also taken advantage of the country's porous borders, especially its maritime border, to import firearms. They appear to be using the border area between Cabo Delgado province and Tanzania's Mtwara and Ruvuma regions to import firearms.<sup>41</sup> Not all of these weapons originate in Tanzania. Some come from the Great Lakes region, moving through Tanzania to Mozambique.<sup>42</sup> Somalia is also believed to be a source of weapons for the insurgents, according to several interviewees.<sup>43</sup>

Both the Nacala and Beira ports in Mozambique have been identified as entry points for illicit goods moving into and out of Mozambique, including stolen vehicles, explosives for illegal mining, firearms, tobacco and alcohol.<sup>44</sup> Port workers and employees at the Kudumba cargo-scanning company in Maputo port told the GI-TOC that they are forbidden to scan the containers of certain clients, although the assumption is that this relates more to drug smuggling than the illicit movement of firearms.<sup>45</sup>

In Zimbabwe, the illegal weapons trade is fuelled by the easy availability of goods from neighbouring countries. Many of these weapons originate from Mozambique along Zimbabwe's eastern border or from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Angola. Historically, Zimbabwe has also been a transit country for larger consignments of firearms destined for the DRC, Mozambique and other countries further north.

The militarization of Zimbabwe from 2000, as the Mugabe regime responded to the political threat posted by a new opposition group, the Movement for Democratic Change, created local demand for firearms. Some state and paramilitary groups, anxious about Zimbabwe's parlous economic situation in the 2000s, began to smuggle firearms acquired from the Mugabe regime to neighbouring countries.

Armed insurgents pose with an Islamic State flag outside a municipal building after overrunning the northern Mozambican town of Quissanga in early April 2020. *Photo: Twitter*





Rifles stacked up on shelves in a secure storage area of a firearms dealership.

© Shaun Swingler

Organized networks involving Zimbabweans, Mozambicans and South Africans have smuggled firearms along the same routes used to move illicit cigarettes, drugs, ivory, gold and diamonds across regional borders. In July 2004, a team of journalists from the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation, investigating allegations of smuggling, was offered 15 weapons by a group of gun runners operating between the three countries. More recently, a crime analyst with the South African Banking Risk Information Centre (SABRIC) told the GI-TOC in an interview that since 2016/17, new AK-47s are believed to be coming from Zimbabwe.<sup>46</sup>

The huge Zimbabwe diaspora population has also contributed to the flow of firearms in two ways:

- Some transnational syndicates are taking advantage of the high levels of human trafficking to also smuggle firearms, using small vehicles and buses.
- As Zimbabwe's socio-economic situation has worsened, many Zimbabweans are becoming reliant on money and groceries sent by their friends and family in the diaspora. Enterprising individuals known as *amalayitsha* have formed groups to transport groceries and money into Zimbabwe and some have used the relationships developed with border officials to smuggle firearms into and out of the country.

A respondent working in the conservation sector indicated that Zambia has also been a source of some rifles used for poaching in Zimbabwe and that hunting rifles, often equipped with silencers (illegal in Zimbabwe) and telescopic sights, have been provided by middlemen in South Africa to poaching syndicates in Zimbabwe.<sup>47</sup>



**FIGURE 4** Cross-border illegal weapons flows, 1990–1998.



**FIGURE 5** Cross-border illegal weapons flows, 1998–2010.

## Diversion of legal civilian firearms

Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa all have relatively comprehensive legislation to regulate the civilian ownership of legal firearms. However, only South Africa publishes official information on the number of firearms lost or stolen from legal owners. Of the three countries, and indeed within the SADC region as a whole, South Africa has the largest number of legally held civilian firearms. In July 2019, the South African police reported that these numbered 2 582 656.<sup>48</sup>

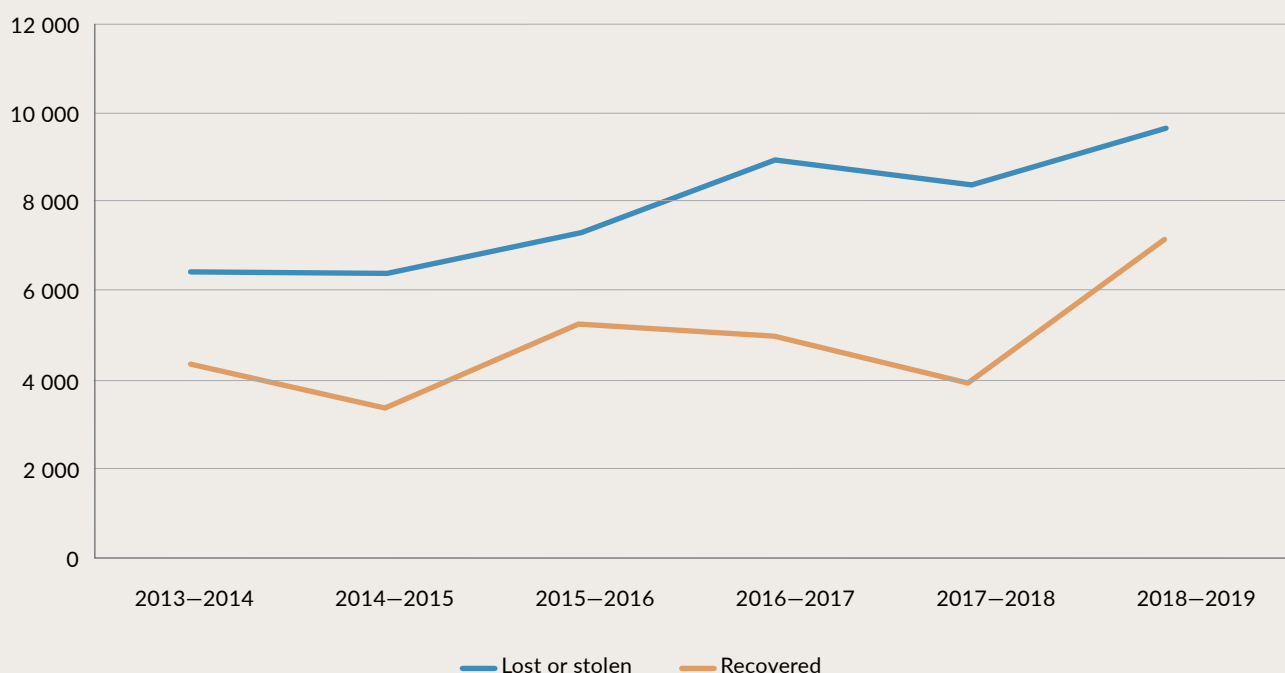
Police statistics show that between 2013/14 and 2018/19, more than 47 028 licensed civilian firearms were reported lost or stolen.<sup>49</sup> During the same period, police recovered 28 891 of them,<sup>50</sup> leaving 18 137 unaccounted for, which are likely to be in the hands of criminals.

Thousands of licensed civilian firearms have been reported lost or stolen, and actual numbers could be even higher.

© Shaun Swingler







**FIGURE 6** Licensed civilian firearms reported lost or stolen, and those recovered by the South African Police Service (SAPS).

SOURCE: SAPS annual reports, 2013/14 to 2018/19

NOTE: It is important to note that there is often not a direct correlation between the number of licensed firearms lost in a particular financial year and the firearms reported to have been recovered by police in the same financial year. In many cases, the firearms recovered in a given year would have been lost in previous financial years.

While this figure may seem relatively high, the reality is that the number of lost and stolen civilian firearms may be significantly higher than what has been reported to the police. A 2015 presentation on the Firearms Control Act showed that between 2003 and 2014, about 20 291 civilian-owned firearms were recovered that had never been reported as lost or stolen by their owners. This figure included 19 143 firearms licensed to private individuals, 381 firearms licensed to businesses or non-governmental institutions and 767 licensed to firearm dealers.<sup>51</sup>

The diversion of firearms, through leakages and losses from private security companies, also plays a role in the illicit firearm economy, not only in South Africa but also in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In South Africa, the Director of the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA), told Parliament that although the regulatory authority did not know the exact number of firearms active in the security industry, a 2013/14 desktop audit conducted by PSIRA showed that there were 3 340 registered security companies that were licensed to possess firearms and 101 000 firearm licences within the industry.<sup>52</sup> The director also highlighted the fact that the regulatory authority was not able to track what private security companies did with their firearms when they closed down.

*Civilians unlawfully access firearms from people engaged in private security services.*

The risks associated with the regulatory authority's inability to track firearms within the private security industry was raised in interviews conducted with people linked to taxi violence in Gauteng. At least two interviewees claimed that they were able to unlawfully access firearms from people engaged in private security services and were able to buy these legally obtained weapons once companies no longer had any use for them.<sup>53</sup>

In Mozambique, it is difficult for private security personnel to obtain semi-automatic firearms legally because of government restrictions.<sup>54</sup> However, many private security firms are owned by senior FRELIMO members who, after 1992, were able to arm their employees with unregistered state weapons left over from the civil war. Companies in this industry should get permits to operate from the Ministry of the Interior. This would allow them to buy weapons locally or import them from abroad. Every month these companies are required to send a full inventory of all the weapons and ammunition in their possession to the ministry.

However, while these reports are subject to verification inspections,<sup>55</sup> several interviewees regarded the level of controls as being very weak. One senior police officer from the National Criminal Investigation Service said that 'control is based on trust and good faith',<sup>56</sup> while another suggested that private security companies may be a source of illegal firearms in circulation because the state has not kept track of how many weapons are imported and under what conditions, how they are controlled and how they are kept.<sup>57</sup>

Criminals in Mozambique have been able to rent weapons from members of private security firms.<sup>58</sup> According to a senior RENAMO official interviewed, some private security workers are incentivized to rent out their weapons because of poor pay and dangerous working conditions as well as the failure of their employers to register them with the national institute of social security (Instituto Nacional de Segurança Social).<sup>59</sup>

In Zimbabwe, the private security sector has a significant presence in the mining areas and is probably one of the largest holders of firearms and ammunition in the country, yet its presence is low key as these companies' activities are not reported on by the media, civil society or researchers. The demand for informal private security companies in the mining sector fuels growth for unregistered firearms and ammunition.

Large, medium and small security companies operating in the gold mining areas are typically registered and use licensed equipment. However, informal private security companies are not, and they are likely to use unlicensed weapons, avoiding cumbersome licensing procedures and undue scrutiny.<sup>60</sup> They are typically engaged by small-scale gold miners, both legal and illegal. A small-scale gold mine owner based in Zimbabwe's Kadoma District said:



What would you do if you did not have enough money to engage a registered security company with armed guards who have licensed firearms? You engage an unregistered private security team, which is cheaper, and you cannot ask them to bring sjamboks or catapults to protect your mining operations against *makorokoza* [artisanal miners], who can invade your mine any time. You want them to bring guns and bullets even if they are not registered. If something bad happens, like invading *makorokoza* being shot dead by the private security guards, it will not be the mine owner's fault that the firearms were not registered. In any case, the guns or bullets recovered cannot be traced back to anyone since the gun was not registered.<sup>61</sup>

In southern Africa, the diversion of firearms under the jurisdiction of the police has become a serious problem. Above, a police-issue Z88 pistol and a standard army-issue R4 assault rifle.

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## Diversion of police firearms

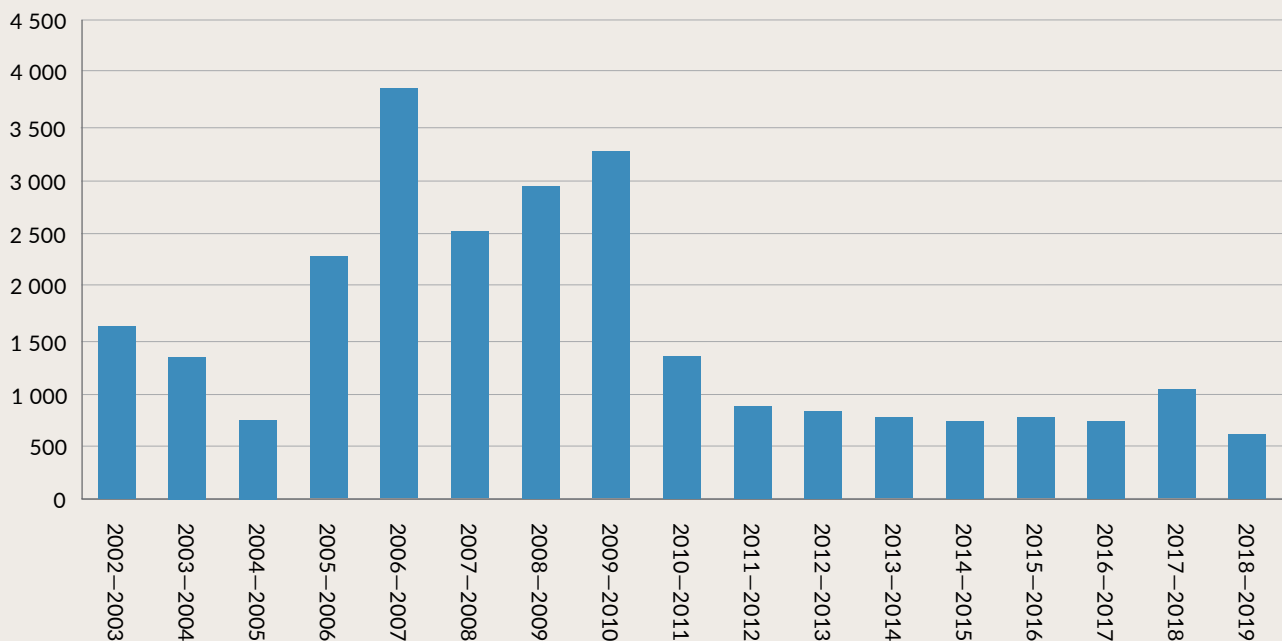
In April 2015, then UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon submitted a report to the UN Security Council in which he referred to the diversion of conventional arms, and particularly small arms, as being a major problem in many parts of the world. The Secretary General also said poor weapons management was of concern, with many states lacking thorough planning in this regard and little regard being paid to safe storage, handling, transportation and disposal: 'Poor national inventory practices mean that surpluses cannot be identified, leading to extensive build-ups of frequently unnecessary stockpiles.'<sup>62</sup>

In Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa, the diversion of firearms under the jurisdiction of the police has become a serious problem.

South Africa has the highest number of both police officials and police-issue firearms,<sup>63</sup> with 192 277 police officials and 258 000 firearms.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Mozambique has about 20 000 police officers and 24 000 firearms and Zimbabwe 19 500 officers and 23 000 firearms.<sup>65</sup>

For a number of years, concerns have been raised in all three countries about the poor management and control of police-issue firearms coupled with allegations that a significant number of firearms under the jurisdiction of the police have made their way into the hands of criminal elements. While the South African police annually publishes information on the number of police firearms lost/stolen each year, neither Mozambique nor Zimbabwe do so. Despite this, in both of the latter countries, there is significant anecdotal information to suggest that police officials there are involved in selling and renting out their police-issue firearms. Referring to the problem of police firearm losses, a senior Mozambique police officer from the national criminal investigation service (Serviço Nacional de Investigação Criminal) said: 'Weapons control has not been strict. There has also been opportunism on the part of military or police officers who claim to have lost weapons during operations, when in fact they have diverted the weapons for use in criminal acts.'<sup>66</sup>

In South Africa, 26 277 police-issue firearms were lost or stolen between 2002/3 and 2018/19, according to published information. The majority of these (18 538) were lost or stolen during the eight years from 2002/03, with a much lower 7 739 being lost or stolen in the subsequent nine years to 2018/19.<sup>67</sup>



**FIGURE 7** Loss of SAPS-issue firearms, 2002 to 2019.

SOURCE: SAPS annual reports and parliamentary questions; Mark Shaw, *Give Us More Guns: How South Africa's Gangs were Armed*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2021.

There are two reasons why the number declined after 2010. The first is that the SAPS, largely in response to pressure from both the public and the Parliament, developed ways to reduce these losses. This included introducing Integrated Ballistics Identification System (IBIS) testing, in terms of which testing would link police officers to firearms issued to them and for which they would be accountable,<sup>68</sup> and the dot-pin marking of all active SAPS firearms with the SAPS emblem to allow them to be more easily traced.

The second, and more concerning reason, for the reported decline was SAPS's decision to change the way in which lost/stolen police-issue firearms were reported. Prior to 2010/11 when reporting on the loss/theft of such firearms, those that could not be traced during station audits were included in the statistics. However, after 2011/12, those weapons that were unaccounted for were not included in the numbers, only those that were actually reported as being lost or stolen by individual police officers. This has major implications for the accuracy of published figures, suggesting that the number of police firearms that have been lost or stolen since the new system came into force is likely to be significantly higher than what has been recorded.

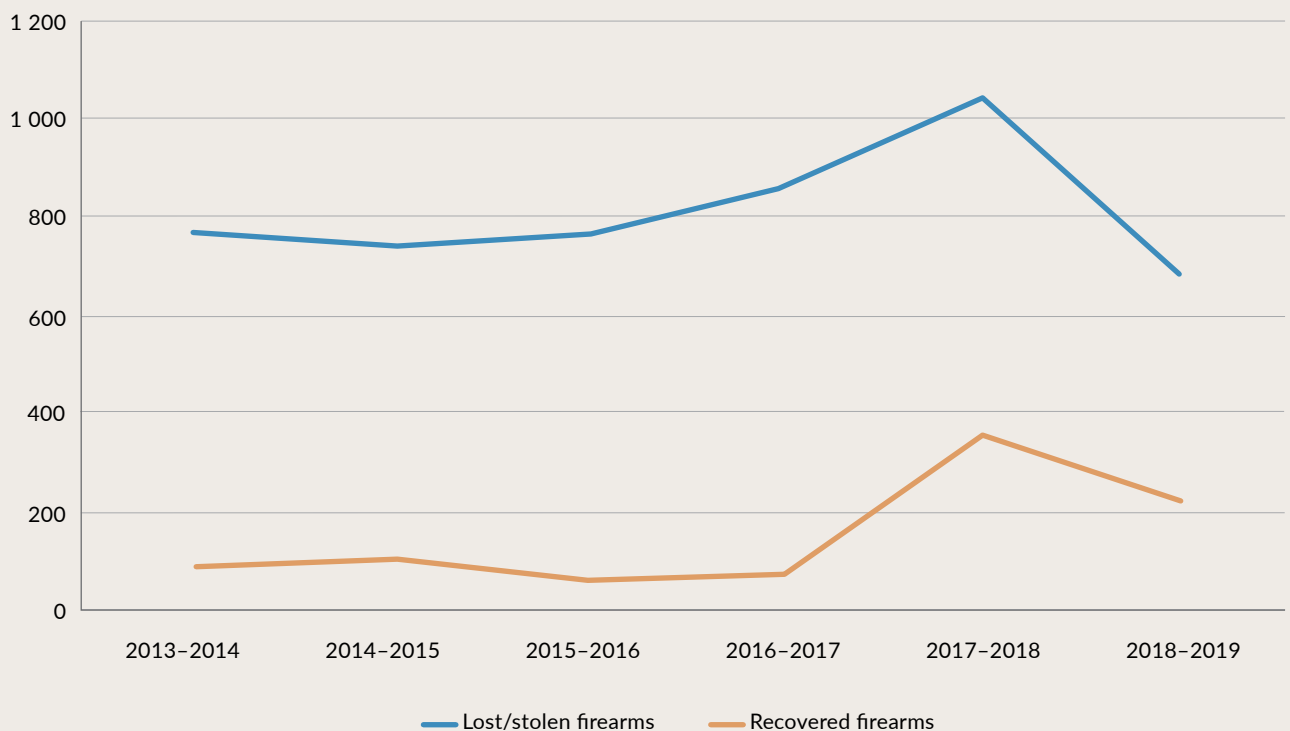
This concern appears to be backed up by the Auditor General of South Africa, who found during the 2018/19 annual audit of the police that the SAPS had under-reported the number of firearms lost/stolen because many of these weapons had not been captured on the Enhanced Firearms Registration System.<sup>69</sup> The Auditor General also found that evidence of the recovery of police issue firearms provided during the audit did not correspond with the police's reported achievements in this regard. He said some of the police issue firearms reported as having been recovered had not initially been reported as lost/stolen.<sup>70</sup>

A major factor contributing to the disappearance of police issue firearms in South Africa is the lack of consequences for officers who lose their weapons. In 2010, then police minister Nathi Mthethwa introduced the IBIS and the marking of all issued weapons, as described above, to address this issue. The SAPS also announced that a policy was being drawn up that would ensure that police officers would be fired for losing their firearms. However, eight years later, in the SAPS 2017/18 annual report, it was stated that the police were still developing a 'national instruction for the loss of official firearms', suggesting nothing had been done over this time.<sup>71</sup> There is also no indication of when, or if, it may be completed. The GI-TOC was unable to get official comment on this.

What is clear is that few police officers have been charged or disciplined for the loss/theft of their police issue firearms. The 2018/19 SAPS annual report says only six officers had faced disciplinary charges for contravening the Firearms Control Act over the period,<sup>72</sup> despite the Auditor General reporting that the police had lost 689 firearms during the same year.<sup>73</sup> The SAPS also reported that 607 firearms had been lost or stolen, a figure well below that of the Auditor General.

In another worrying development, during a briefing on its 2018/19 annual report with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police in October 2019, the SAPS admitted that some police firearms could not be tracked because of problems with the IT system.<sup>74</sup> The National Commissioner and his management team also told the committee that some police firearms were not being 'dot-peen marked' and IBIS tested because the Firearm Permit System, which assists with the track and trace of firearms and firearm permits, was 'still experiencing problems'.<sup>75</sup>

Compounding the problems of capturing the real losses of police issue firearms in South Africa is the marked difference in the recovery rate of firearms lost by or stolen from the police and those licensed firearms lost by or stolen from civilians. Between 2013/14 and 2018/19, the recovery rate for civilian weapons was 61 per cent while that for police-issue was just 18 per cent. One possible reason for this difference is that a significant number of these firearms were not actually lost or stolen, but rather illegally diverted.



**FIGURE 8** Recovery of SAPS firearms and number of firearms lost/stolen, 2013/14 to 2018/19.

SOURCE: SAPS annual reports, <https://www.saps.gov.za/about/stratframework/annualreports.php>

NOTE: It is important to note that there is often not a direct correlation between the number of licensed firearms lost in a particular financial year and the firearms reported to have been recovered by police in the same financial year. In many cases, the firearms recovered in a given year would have been lost in previous financial years.

Unfortunately, the loss/theft of police-issue firearms is not the only problem police in the three countries face with regard to weapons under their jurisdiction. They also experience significant problems with the loss/theft of firearms that have been seized, handed-in and/or stored in police armouries.

In Mozambique in around 2005, interviews with representatives from the Ministry of Justice revealed that cases related to weapons seized by the police during the course of legitimate investigations often never make it to court. Some of these illegal firearms then reappear on the streets. Information gathered during this time also indicated that firearms acquired by gangs from the police were not necessarily police firearms but rather firearms held in police custody.<sup>76</sup> In 2017, in the initial insurgent attack carried out in Cabo Delgado, the weapons used appear to have originated in warehouses belonging to Mozambique's former criminal investigation police (Polícia de Investigação Criminal), now known as the national criminal investigation service, in Maputo province.<sup>77</sup>

In an interview, a senior RENAMO official also noted that some of the weapons used in early attacks in Cabo Delgado province were sourced by the insurgents from former police officers in the area. These officers had originally lost their jobs for stealing police weapons and selling them on the black market. Following their expulsion, they continued to facilitate the sale of weapons, including to the insurgents.<sup>78</sup> More recently, the insurgents have been photographed with Israeli-made weapons used by the Mozambican police special operations group (Grupo de Operações Especiais).

The problem of police weapons being illegally accessed is more widespread than in Cabo Delgado province. In an interview, a prison guard in Chókwè, Gaza province, said that in 2017, a cache of seven weapons was confiscated from a group of organized criminals in Chókwè and taken to Gaza's provincial police command. These weapons, which included an AK-47, two pistols and a Mauser .375 hunting rifle, then went missing and were found again in May 2020 in Mabalane in the north of Gaza province.<sup>79</sup>

There are also incidents where the same firearm has been seized by the police more than once. For example, a police officer from Maputo said the same Mauser .375 hunting rifle was confiscated three times by the police in Massingir, first in 2008 in Pumbe, then on 26 August 2010 in Godji and finally on 30 December 2011 in Massingir. Each time the weapon was deposited with the police district command in Massingir before it went missing again.<sup>80</sup> The same policeman told the GI-TOC that this was not a unique case and firearms seized by the police were often sold back to criminals at an inflated price. Another police officer from Chibuto, Gaza province, said that between 2016 and 2017, dozens of confiscated weapons went missing from the police district command in Massingir, but nobody had ever been convicted for the thefts.<sup>81</sup>

*In Zimbabwe, the diversion of firearms from police armouries by corrupt officials is a serious problem.*

Similar weaknesses were also highlighted in arms inventory controls within Mozambique police armouries following the murder of civil society activist Anastacio Matavel in Xai Xai on 7 October 2019. Lawyers for Matavel's family alleged that multiple weapons were taken from the Xai Xai police armoury by police officers over a period of 18 days from 19 September 2019. The lawyers claimed that the officers stored the weapons at their house for over two weeks before they used them to murder Matavel.<sup>82</sup>

In Zimbabwe the diversion of firearms from police armouries by corrupt officials is a serious problem. This includes occasional instances of civilian firearms deposited at police armouries for safe keeping being diverted to criminals.<sup>83</sup> There are two cases that illustrate this.

The first is that of Caston Magejo from Chitekete in Gokwe, an alleged rhino and elephant poacher who was arrested in Save Valley Conservancy on 23 July 2016. He was found in possession of a .458 rifle, which is alleged to have belonged to a Roland George who passed away in February 2004. The rifle was then registered in the name of the executor of George's estate, who was based in Harare. The rifle was removed from the Zimbabwe Republic Police armoury and given to a third party without being relicensed. It found its way into the hands of a notorious poaching syndicate that was eventually captured by parks authorities and the police in July and August 2016.

The second case is that of another notorious poacher, Godknows Mashame of Mbizo, Kwekwe, who was convicted of and sentenced for poaching in the Buby Valley Conservancy in Chiredzi and in the Chipinge Safari Area. Mashame was found in possession of a Sabi Mauser .458 rifle and other firearms that included .303 rifles, a 12 mm shotgun, a 2.2 rifle, as well as two firearm magazines, 71 Emmex explosives, a 12-channel global positioning system and eight live rounds. The .458 rifle belonged to an Ian Ferguson who had deposited it in the Zimbabwe Republic Police armoury at Beitbridge Police Station for safe keeping. While the firearm was in the safe keeping of police pending transfer of ownership, Ferguson was informed by them that the rifle had mistakenly been destroyed. Ferguson's investigations found it had not been destroyed, but rather provided by the police to the poacher.

In Zimbabwe, in April 2019, a senior Bulawayo police officer, Manatsa Matibe, who was in charge of Matabeleland province's armoury, was arrested for allegedly stealing Zimbabwean firearms in his custody. In his bail application, Matibe denied being responsible for the theft. Police also arrested three of his colleagues, one of whom was the officer in charge of the Matabeleland North Provincial Armoury.<sup>84</sup>

In South Africa, there have been ongoing problems with theft and loss of firearms from both the SAPS evidence stores (commonly known as the SAPS 13 stores)<sup>85</sup> and from police armouries. In KwaZulu-Natal in 2012, a provincial police task team was put in place to monitor the province's 184 police stations and to ensure that proper records and files were being kept of firearms in their custody.<sup>86</sup> The task team was established after allegations were made that hundreds of guns had gone missing or were unaccounted for at police stations across the province. For example, 80 firearms could not be accounted for at the Berea Road police station, about



100 firearms were believed to have gone missing from the Greenwood Park and Umbumbulu police stations and 50 firearms were unaccounted for at the Umlazi police station.<sup>87</sup> More recently, during 2017, different media reports said 92 firearms had gone missing at just six police stations nationally.

The South African police were aware of the problems regarding control of firearms at SAPS 13 (evidence) stores. During a briefing on 7 May 2011, the SAPS informed the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee that a board of enquiry comprising SAPS members was going to be appointed to improve the control of firearms and the management of the stores.<sup>88</sup> However, it is not clear if the board was established and, if it were, if it ever reported on its activities. Attempts to find out were unsuccessful.

Further evidence of the vulnerability of local police stations' 13 stores was provided by the SAPS itself at the end of 2019 when it informed parliament that 46 police stations would be excluded from participating in the planned national firearm amnesty because there were doubts about their ability to store firearms safely.<sup>89</sup>

There is a bigger picture too. In June 2016, senior police officer Colonel Christiaan Lodewyk Prinsloo, who was responsible for managing several of the Gauteng provincial armories and firearm stores, admitted in court to being part of a network that had supplied at least 2 400 firearms to criminal groups. The network allegedly included another senior police officer, a Colonel Naidoo, who was also involved in the management of police armories and central firearm stores.

The network operated undetected for eight years before being caught by a team of dogged detectives from the Western Cape under a police project, code named Project Impi.

During those eight years, Prinsloo and his accomplices used their access to police armories and central police firearm stores to siphon off weapons. These included state issue firearms that had been recalled, illegal firearms seized during police operations and those that had been handed in during amnesties.<sup>90</sup> Many of the weapons illegally traded had been earmarked for destruction<sup>91</sup> and one senior investigator said some of the firearms recovered during Project Impi were listed as having been destroyed.<sup>92</sup>

Project Impi was a Western Cape police initiative established after police in that province started to suspect the existence of illicit firearm trafficking linked to police officers. However, as the investigation unfolded, it seemed that the network was operating in other provinces, particularly KwaZulu-Natal. One of the most senior officers involved in Project Impi said that firearms 'had been going into Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal for a long time before the network began to see Cape Town as another lucrative market'.<sup>93</sup>

Through Project Impi, the police ascertained that at least 2 400 firearms had been sold to criminals in the Western Cape. They were able to link 900 of these seized firearms to 1 060 murders. However, the police acknowledged that they had yet to recover about 1 200 firearms trafficked in the Western Cape by this network.<sup>94</sup>

*In South Africa, there is an absence of effective security measures in the storage of weapons at police facilities.*

While there has been extensive media coverage of the Prinsloo/Naidoo network and its activities, this is not an isolated case of two rogue officers. Two years earlier, in 2014, police raided the house of a Ukrainian couple in Norwood, Johannesburg, where they seized more than 300 firearms, of which 112 were assault rifles. The cache not only included firearms that had been reportedly destroyed by the police, but more than half of the 300 items were registered to the state.<sup>95</sup>

The couple and their domestic worker appeared in the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court in July 2014, charged with possession of unlicensed firearms and ammunition, dealing in dagga, and contravention of the Explosives Act. Speaking during their bail applications, Prosecutor Talita Louw told the court that among the recovered weapons were guns that should have been destroyed during the amnesty period. She said that an R1 rifle handed in at the Roodepoort police station in April 2010 during the amnesty was among the confiscated weapons.

'In May 2010, the same rifle was officially taken out of the police storeroom for destruction. It is not known how the same firearm was found in the possession of the applicants.'<sup>96</sup> Louw said investigators were checking the serial numbers of other firearms handed in at police stations across the country: 'There are several firearms that have visible serial numbers but are not reflected as stolen on the firearm registration system. They are still registered and have ownership.'<sup>97</sup> Louw also told the court that among the items were weapons registered to the state: 'The only inference that one can make is that there is more to this case than meets the eye. Investigations are under way to determine how these firearms left the custody of the police.'<sup>98</sup>

Following the Norwood raid, the police informed the public that an investigation into firearms handed to police during the amnesty process was under way, starting in Gauteng.<sup>99</sup> The then national police commissioner, Mangwashe Phiyega, told the media: 'We are going to look into this in detail to establish the origins of these arms and ammunition and, more importantly, what they were intended for.'<sup>100</sup>

At the time, it was expected that these arrests and subsequent court cases would shed light on corrupt police officers as well as other government officials who may have sold guns to criminals. However, more than six years down the line, there is no new information about where the guns came from, who was involved in the sale of the guns, and why they were being stored in the Norwood house. Attempts by the GI-TOC to follow up on the case were unsuccessful. One person in the National Prosecuting Authority said the case had simply disappeared.<sup>101</sup> It also seems that the police's investigation announced so publicly after the Norwood raid has slipped off the agenda.

What both Project Impi and the Norwood case highlight is that the police have serious problems regarding the storage and destruction of weapons in their possession. SAPS legal services have highlighted the absence of effective security measures in the storage of weapons at police facilities.<sup>102</sup> There also appears to be no effective and independent auditing of the firearms destruction process. An official of the South African Arms and Ammunition Dealers Association said: 'There seems to be a lack of control of firearms identified for destruction. When doing inspections there is no stock list available.'



## Diversion of military firearms

More weapons are held by the national defence forces in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa than the police. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) holds the highest number of firearms (350 636) followed by the Zimbabwean National Army (91 580) and the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces or Forças Armadas de Defesa de Moçambique (FADM), which has 60 000 weapons.<sup>103</sup>

As is the case with the police, the diversion of firearms held by the defence forces in these countries fuels the illicit firearm economy, given impetus by the fact that none of them reports annually on the number of firearms lost by or stolen from their employees.

In some cases, the diversion of firearms from this source occurs because armouries are poorly guarded and maintained, as is the case in parts of northern Mozambique where insurgents have specifically targeted the FADM's military arsenals because they are considered to be easy targets.<sup>104</sup> However, many cases involve corrupt army personnel who sell or rent out firearms managed by or issued to them. Few are ever charged despite the frequency of such occurrences.

Contributing to this problem in Mozambique is the fact that FADM members often leave their barracks with their firearms and stay in uniform even when they are off duty. This makes it difficult to keep track of their firearms,<sup>105</sup> and makes it easy for these soldiers to sell or rent them out. Analyst Luca Bussotti writes about the 'informal privatization' of state-owned assets by the ruling classes in Mozambique, noting that 'this tendency is yet more accentuated within military environments'.<sup>106</sup>

Although in South Africa information on the loss/theft of firearms from the SANDF is not published annually, information drawn from published articles, media reports and parliamentary questions does indicate that the loss of SANDF firearms is a serious problem.

A Vektor R4 assault rifle, a standard military issue in South Africa. The diversion of firearms belonging to the defence forces in the country fuels the illicit firearm economy. © Julian Rademeyer

In July 2007, a report by the SANDF legal services, which was leaked to *The Star* newspaper, alleged that the SANDF did not have any system in place to ensure that theft and losses of its arms and ammunition were immediately reported to the police. The report also claimed that the SANDF had no register of firearms of less than 20 mm, nor details of every official allowed to be in possession of a firearm and particulars regarding disposal, transfer, loss, theft and destruction of the aforesaid firearms. The report warned that the head of the SANDF, General Godfrey Nhlanhla Ngwenya, could face criminal charges because of the army's shoddy weapons control. The newspaper alleged that it had uncovered at least a half a dozen criminal cases involving stolen SANDF weapons, including the theft of more than 500 weapons from an SANDF base in the town of Mthatha in Eastern Cape province.<sup>107</sup>

Since this report, little seems to have changed. A ministerial response to a parliamentary question in 2010 stated that between 2007 and 2010, 134 rifles were stolen from the SANDF.<sup>108</sup> In July 2016, the *Sunday Times* newspaper also published an article alleging that hand grenades, machine guns, pistols and hundreds of rounds of ammunition were stolen when six storerooms at the Simon's Town Naval Base armoury in Cape Town were broken into. The newspaper also reported that a military source allegedly told their reporter that, among the weapons and munitions taken in the burglary, were 77 hand grenades as well as Uzi sub-machine guns and R1 rifles. The source allegedly claimed that an audit was being conducted. 'There's a lot missing, including possibly 12.75 mm and 20 mm machine guns, and explosives other than hand grenades. The area is in lockdown.'<sup>109</sup>

More recently, in December 2019, a spot check was done on the SANDF Lyttleton Tek Base armoury outside Pretoria, where it was found that an angle grinder had been used to open a safe and that 19 R4 rifles had been stolen.<sup>110</sup> The information was leaked to the media and 10 people were arrested in late December 2019. However, Pikkie Greef, the head of the South African National Defence Union, said the 12 were arrested merely for being on duty at the time the theft was discovered. He added that the SANDF could not say when the actual theft occurred. Apparently, the last time the base was audited was in September 2019, so the theft could have occurred any time between September and December 2019. To complicate matters further, the footage from the cameras at the armoury was not accessible.<sup>111</sup>

Added to this, in October 2020, the Minister of Defence admitted to Parliament that between April 2017 and August 2020, 50 standard issue R4 and R5 rifles, ten Z88 pistols, five Beretta pistols, four Star pistols, a pair of Sig Sauers, one Glock pistol and a vector handgun had been lost or stolen from the SANDF.<sup>112</sup>

## **Diversion of firearms from other government agencies**

In all three countries, the police and army are not the only government agencies that possess state-issue firearms. Government agencies and institutions, such as the prisons/correctional services, prosecuting authorities, national intelligence services and agricultural departments also have them. It was not possible to get details of exactly how many such firearms exist outside the police and army in each of the three countries. There is no information on either the number of firearms held by different government agencies nor the number of firearms they have lost.<sup>113</sup>

In South Africa, as part of this research, the GI-TOC submitted formal requests to seven government departments (Defence, Military Veterans, Correctional Services, Environmental Affairs, Justice and Constitutional Development, the State Security Agency and Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries),<sup>114</sup> requesting information on how many state-issue firearms are held by each department and, of these, how many had been lost or stolen over the past 10 years. The request was made as a formal application under the Promotion of Access to Information Act of 2000.<sup>115</sup> Only the Department of Justice responded to the request. This not only shows a problematic disregard for the act,<sup>116</sup> but may also indicate the lack of seriousness with which different government departments view control of firearms under their jurisdiction.

What makes the situation more concerning is the number of weapons held by the state. In a SAPS briefing during a parliamentary national firearms summit in 2015, the National Commissioner said there were 425 official government institutions that owned just under 1.3 million firearms.<sup>117</sup> Currently, the SAPS and the SANDF jointly hold just over 608 000 firearms, which means more than 660 000 guns are held by other government institutions in South Africa.

In January 2021, Loyiso Jafta, the acting director general of South Africa's State Security Agency (SSA), testifying before the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, said he was worried that firearms under the jurisdiction of SSA could have been used in criminal acts. Explaining this to the Commission, Jafta referred to how the Chief Directorate of Special Operations (CDSO) had violated SSA firearm policies and procedures, resulting in the SSA not being able to trace all the firearms and ammunition that had been taken out of SSA's armoury. These violations included pistols and assault rifles being kept in the personal custody of certain CDSO members for years with no one in the SSA knowing where the firearms were being stored or what they were being used for.

Jafta also told the Commission that, in some instances, these firearms were even given to people who were not members of SSA. He said the organization was battling to recover all firearms and ammunition issued to the CDSO. Jafta's testimony was corroborated in an affidavit submitted to the Commission by Mr Y, who was one of the investigators in Project Veza, a project set up to investigate allegations of irregularities and criminality at the SSA between 2012 and 2018 (see below).

### **State Security Agency illegally accesses firearms: Information provided to the Zondo Commission**

The SSA has stringent controls and procedures in place to manage firearms under its jurisdiction and ensure the agency complies with the requirements of the Firearms Control Act. The SSA armoury is managed by the Chief Directorate Internal Security (CDIS), which has a set of standing operating procedures for the management, storage and issuing of firearms. However, in late 2014 and early 2015, the CDSO, with the assistance of the general manager of CDIS, violated SSA policies and procedures, allowing the CDSO, to illegally access firearms stored in the SSA armoury.

In late 2014 and early 2015, the CDSO began requesting firearms from the SSA armoury. In total during this period, 39 firearms were issued to the CDSO. The 39 firearms included 11 R4 assault rifles, 10 pistols, four Glock 17 pistols, eight Glock 19 pistols, one 12-gauge shotgun, three VXP submachine guns and two Uzi submachine guns. According to information presented by witnesses to the Zondo Commission, the request for these firearms was sent by the deputy director general in charge of counter intelligence, Thulani Dlomo, to the general manager of CDIS, and these firearms were then issued without proper procedures being followed. In almost all instances, the motivation for why the firearm should be issued were either completely vague or non-existent and CDSO was completely unaccountable for the firearms issued.

Examples of the lack of controls for the 39 firearms included:

- Firearms handed to the CDSO were given to individuals who were not in the employment of SSA.
- In January 2015, the general manager of CDIS authorized a CDSO member who did not possess the necessary competency to collect a cache of firearms, which were transported by this CDSO official without the necessary precautions being taken.
- Some of the 39 firearms were kept unsecured in a hotel room and five of these firearms went missing from the room. Two of the five firearms were subsequently recovered but three are still missing. For four years after the loss of these firearms, the CDSO responsible for the loss failed to report the losses to the SAPS, as required by law.
- In September 2014, SSA armoury officials were instructed to transport four R4 and six pistols to a foreign country without the necessary motivation being given for why these firearms were needed.

In December 2016, a new manager was appointed to the CDSO and was instructed to return all 39 firearms issued to the CDSO. Only 21 were returned and 18 remained unaccounted for. In addition, in 2014 and 2015, an amount of 1 635 rounds of ammunition was issued to the CDSO and, when in 2016 the new manager was asked to return this ammunition, only 755 rounds were returned. No motivation was given for the ammunition used and some of the 755 rounds of ammunition returned were not from SSA stocks, raising questions about what had happened to the original SSA ammunition.

In April 2018, as pressure mounted within SSA regarding the return of all outstanding firearms issued to CDSO, armoury officials were informed they could go to Durban International Airport to retrieve 11 of these still outstanding firearms. On the armoury officials' arrival at the airport, they were confronted by unknown men armed with the 11 firearms. These unknown men only agreed to hand their firearms to the SSA armoury officials after a call was made to Ambassador Dlomo.

While the SAPS does publish some data on the loss of state firearms from government departments, it does not specify in which government departments the losses occurred. The data also relies on different departments reporting all losses/thefts to the police, which does not happen in many cases. The 2015 Analysis of the Firearms Control Act on Crime 1999 to 2013 found that between 2000 and 2014:

- Government departments (excluding the SAPS but including the SANDF), reported 18 033 firearms lost/stolen;
- 4 991 state issue firearms were recovered by the police over the period; and none of the above firearms had been reported as being lost/stolen.

In the subsequent five years (2014 to April 2019), SAPS annual reports state that:

- 667 firearms belonging to different departments were lost/stolen; and
- 456 of these were reported as being recovered.<sup>118</sup>

However, based on the poor track record of government departments in accurately reporting lost/stolen firearms, these figures are likely to be inaccurate.

One example of this under-reporting relates to the Metropolitan Police departments that operate in major urban areas in South Africa and fall under the jurisdiction of local metropolitan councils. Figures for the number of firearms lost/stolen from the Metropolitan Police are not readily available. One of the reasons cited for this is the fact that these departments operate as part of the metropolitan councils where the loss of firearms is treated as loss of council property rather than the loss of a lethal weapon.<sup>119</sup>

The inability of Metropolitan Police departments to provide such figures became evident during their May 2010 briefing with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police. Most were unable to answer the committee's question about how many firearms had been lost/stolen by each metropolitan police department. However, at the same meeting, SAPS Visible Police head, Arno Lamoer, told the committee that between 1999 and 2000, when the Metropolitan Police departments were established, 1 337 firearms had been reported lost/stolen from them.<sup>120</sup>

Further evidence on the issue was given at a meeting of the Executive Council of the eThekweni Municipality in July 2015 to discuss contracts awarded without following proper procurement processes. Questions were asked about why the city needed to buy more guns for the Metropolitan Police when a report to the committee a few years earlier had shown that they had already lost more than 300 guns.<sup>121</sup>

More recently, in July 2019, an Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Police Department armoury audit report allegedly found that more than 700 firearms were missing, stolen or unaccounted for in the department.<sup>122</sup> The report is said to have highlighted the gross incompetence of the head of the armoury and the shambolic state of affairs within it. The report also found that out of the 3 525 firearms licensed, only 2 518 could be accounted for, 382 had been reported missing or stolen and 357 were unaccounted for.<sup>123</sup> The 382 firearms reported missing or stolen were never reported to the SAPS.<sup>124</sup>

The failure of various South African government departments to report accurately on the loss/theft of firearms within their departments highlights three major problems with the way state institutions are managing their firearms.

- The Firearms Control Act requires government institutions that possess firearms to put in place clear control mechanisms and for the head of these institutions immediately to report any firearms lost/stolen to both the SAPS Firearm Registrar and to their local police station.<sup>125</sup> It is clear from this research that many of these government institutions are not complying with the provisions of the act.<sup>126</sup>
- Some government departments treat the loss/theft of firearms under their jurisdiction in the same way they would treat the loss/theft of other physical assets without taking into account the lethal nature of firearms and damage that can be done should they end up in the hands of criminals.
- The lack of public and parliamentary accountability that exists with regard to government departments' management of firearms is highlighted by the poor management of these assets and the general failure to report such losses and theft to parliament, the police service itself and to the public.

The problem of state-owned firearms management is not unique to South Africa and also exists in both Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In the latter, for example, some of the heavy calibre rifles imported for use in animal control by the ministries of tourism and agriculture were diverted by district officials to poaching networks.<sup>127</sup>

## **Blurred lines: Legal and illegal weapons**

The blurring of lines between legal and illegal firearms makes efforts to tackle the illicit trade in weapons more complex. A number of factors contribute to this problem in the three countries under review. These include legally held firearms being rented out to criminals, legally held firearms used by the legal owners for illegal purposes, the fraudulent issue of firearm licences by the legitimate authority and, specific to Zimbabwe, the sale of redundant state-issue firearms, which have been diverted to criminals.



## The rental business

Not all firearms used by actors within illicit firearms markets are illegal. Some weapons that are legally owned by state institutions, private security companies and private citizens are sometimes rented to criminal elements. In Mozambique, police and army officials are involved in this widespread practice. One police officer in Gaza province gave examples of low-level military, police and border guards in the province buying mansions and cars and even a hotel from the spoils of this illegal rental activity. The monthly salary for these security force members is below 10 000 meticaïs (US\$145).<sup>128</sup>

This also happens in the Ruvuma River area in northern Mozambique. In Maputo, state-issue firearms are reportedly being rented by Mozambican police and army officials to kidnapping networks.<sup>129</sup> Sometimes middlemen act as brokers between the security officials and the end users. In areas such as Niassa province, the middlemen are local shop owners who are also engaged in the low-level smuggling of consumer goods.<sup>130</sup>

## Legal guns, illegal purposes

In many cases, companies or individuals who have legal licences to possess firearms use the weapons for illegal purposes. An example is the South African minibus-taxi industry. Private security companies operating within the industry have been known to use legally acquired firearms to conduct illegal operations on behalf of taxi mafias. These private security companies got involved in the minibus-taxi industry in the mid- to late 1990s. Initially, they focused on VIP protection and guarding taxi bosses but over time they were hired by different associations to safeguard their interests at taxi ranks. This led to the establishment of between 50 to 60 companies specializing in this type of work, some of which are owned by taxi bosses themselves to provide a new income stream and to protect their business interests.<sup>131</sup>

There are numerous reports of private security companies being involved in shoot-outs at taxi ranks. In one such shooting, in June 2018 at the Masukwane taxi rank in Pietermaritzburg Central Business District, one person was killed, and pupils had to be evacuated from a nearby school. Speaking immediately after this shooting, the Member of the Executive Council for Transport, Community Safety and Liaison in KwaZulu-Natal, Mxolisi Kaunda, said the presence of private security companies at taxi ranks did not help to ease tensions. 'They do not assist in resolving disputes in the taxi industry. In fact, some of them are happier if there are disputes because it necessitates their services to be rendered in the particular association,' he said.<sup>132</sup>

In May of the same year, six guards with the Ingonyama VIP Protection unit were arrested after the fatal shooting of four taxi drivers in Brakpan, outside Johannesburg. The shooting took place when drivers arriving in Brakpan for a meeting to discuss internal conflict within the Greater Brakpan Taxi Association were allegedly ambushed by Ingonyama VIP Protection unit members. One eyewitness claimed the drivers were shot from behind as they attempted to flee a hail of bullets. A driver told journalists that the security company was hired to guard the taxi owners. 'But since they were hired last June, the killings have increased. We live in fear because we don't know who is next.'<sup>133</sup>

Companies of this sort are generally well armed. Weapons seized after taxi shootings involving these security companies include AK-47s, R4s and R5s, LM series rifles, AR rifles, Dashprod SAR M14s and an assortment of pistols. In 2014, Blue Ocean Security Services, which had been involved in at least two different taxi shooting incidents, was accused of arming its guards with weapons of war, including R1s and sniper rifles. Referring to this, one newspaper reported that it was 'among a few companies often seen toting heavy-calibre R1 assault rifles in public spaces, which even the police are no longer being issued due to the danger of their 7.62 calibre bullets travelling through suspects and even walls to strike bystanders.' The newspaper claimed to have seen images of the company's guards showing off their massively powerful .50 calibre sniper rifles.<sup>134</sup>

During an interview, the owner of the Taxi Violence Unit VIP Protection security company said registered companies were able to easily access licences, while those not registered with PSIRA were also able to access legal licences, although many also use illegal firearms.<sup>135</sup> Some taxi-linked security companies say they are carrying weapons licensed and owned by a third company.

There have also been allegations that these private security companies even carry out assassinations for their clients. A senior official from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Community Safety and Liaison claimed that, 'Private security companies are now being used to carry out hits. They have licensed firearms and company registrations which are used for other purposes, such as hits. Taxi bosses will hire a private security company and then tell the company to hire people who are the taxi bosses' hitmen who then become part of the security guards used by that company. The illegal use of legal firearms [linked to these private security operators] is where the risk lies.'<sup>136</sup> This view was shared by a PSIRA official, who claimed in an interview that one of the main reasons that some taxi bosses opened security companies was to provide cover for assassins.<sup>137</sup>

### **Sale of redundant firearms**

The sale of redundant firearms seems to be peculiar to Zimbabwe, where the lines between legal and illegal firearms have become blurred due to the state's policy of selling off firearms no longer needed by the government. Weapons such as old .303 rifles from the Zimbabwe police and 7.62 mm Mosin-Nagant rifles from the Zimbabwe National Army are usually sold to small-scale farmers at low prices to enable them to protect their crops and livestock from wildlife or from general theft. One conservationist with knowledge of poaching trends in the Zambezi Basin pointed out that these firearms are often sold by the farmers to poachers: 'The problem of weapons [i.e. .303s] being bought by farmers purportedly for crop and livestock protection and instead being used for poaching has been particularly prevalent in the Sebungwe region of northern Zimbabwe. These guns have been heavily used in elephant poaching.'<sup>138</sup> These illegal exchanges are enabled by the poor control and supervision of the firearms by law enforcement agents who are supposed to check regularly whether the farmers who bought the rifles still have them.

## Fraudulent firearm licences

In South Africa, corruption in the South African Police Central Firearm Registry has enabled known criminals to get firearm licences. During 2020, police arrested 28 people, including high-ranking police officers and Cape Town-based underworld figures, for their involvement in the fraudulent procurement of such licences.

The 28 arrests were the result of a three-year investigation by the National Anti-Gang Unit in the Western Cape into a massive guns-to-gangs syndicate.

Of those arrested, 17 were police officials, two were retired police officers and 11 were civilians with links to the underworld. Two of the police officials were brigadiers in charge of local police stations in Gauteng. The syndicate allegedly acquired firearm licences fraudulently. Police officials at some Gauteng police stations and from the Central Firearm Registry appear to have been involved in this syndicate.<sup>139</sup>

This was not the first time Western Cape police officers had linked key underworld and police officers to the fraudulent procurement of firearm licences. For example, alleged gang boss Ralph Stanfield, two of his family members, three Central Firearm Registry officials and 17 others are standing trial in Cape Town on 109 charges including fraud and the unlawful possession of firearms.

While the above cases have received extensive media coverage, the involvement of police in fraudulently issuing of firearm licences is nothing new. At a media briefing in 2010, the police minister mentioned concerns over irregularities in the issuing of these licences, highlighting the need for an investigation to root out corruption at the Central Firearm Registry.

Recently, the issue of systemic corruption at the registry was also raised in interviews with a range of stakeholders, including both pro- and anti-gun lobbyists. One member of a prominent firearm association said, 'People travel to particular police stations because they have information that for the right amount of money they can buy or fast track a firearm licence. In fact, at one police station in Gauteng, the going prices are R1 000 to R2 000 to get a licence in two weeks, R5 000 to get it in a week and R15 000 for a semi-automatic rifle licence, which will take one week.'<sup>140</sup>


Corruption enables the issue of licences for illegal firearms that have been seized or for unwanted firearms handed into the police. One firearm dealer, who asked not to be named, said he had been approached by a SAPS official and asked to register ghost weapons on his inventory to enable these weapons to be licensed. The dealer was concerned there may be repercussions for his refusal to do so.<sup>141</sup> Another dealer, referring to this practice, said: 'There are police-designated firearm officers and Central Firearms Registry officials who have set themselves up as dealers, manipulating systems to sell and licence illegal firearms that police had seized, or which were handed in during firearm amnesties.'<sup>142</sup>



# FULLY LOADED

## AMMUNITION IN THE ILLICIT FIREARM ECONOMY

The real value of illicit firearms depends on the supply of ammunition. © Halden Krog



**T**he issue of ammunition was raised by the UN Secretary-General in his 2015 report to the UN Security Council:

Small arms typically have a lifespan of multiple decades, yet their real value depends on an uninterrupted supply of ammunition. It is sometimes argued that the trade in ammunition should be excluded from international regulation because of the high volume of its production and trade, which would render it difficult for governments to warrant the detailed levels of record-keeping that would be needed to trace ammunition and for properly regulating its trade. However, as consumer traceability has evolved in other fields, such as pharmaceuticals and food and agricultural products – goods with an even higher turnover – the question of including ammunition in arms regulation seems to be more a matter of political prioritization than one of technical or logistical impossibility.<sup>143</sup>

Access to ammunition is key for criminal networks. Some will seek access to particular types of firearms based on the availability of ammunition for that model.

In Mozambique, those police and military officers who rent out their firearms illegally often include ammunition as part of the rental agreement. It is easy for them to do so because if they are questioned about missing ammunition, they can claim that it was used in the course of duty or to protect themselves from wild animals, for example.<sup>144</sup>



**Ammunition in the armoury  
of a private security company,  
Durban, South Africa, 2020.**

© Shaun Swingler

It is difficult to estimate accurately how much ammunition is lost by state institutions in the three countries under review as most of the losses go undetected. However, in South Africa, details have become available from answers to questions in parliament addressed to the ministers of defence and military veterans and of police. The following information was disclosed.

In the case of the SANDF, replies to different Parliamentary questions revealed the following:

- During the 2013/14 and 2014/15 financial years, just over 33 000 rounds of ammunition were lost or stolen by the SANDF. This included 32 400 R4 rounds that were allegedly stolen from the Lenz military base south of Johannesburg in April 2013.<sup>145</sup>
- Between April 2015 and September 2017, sixteen 40/70 mm rounds, 13 684 5.56 mm rounds, 1 311 7.62 mm rounds and fifteen 9 mm rounds were stolen from the SANDF.<sup>146</sup>
- In 2017/18, 155 R5 rounds, four light machine gun rounds and sixty R4 rounds went missing from the SANDF.
- In the 2018/19 financial year, 330 rounds of R4 ammunition and seven 9 mm rounds went missing.<sup>147</sup>

Similarly, in August 2019, the South African police minister, replying to a question, told Parliament that the SAPS had 'lost' more than 9.5 million rounds of ammunition over the past six financial years.<sup>148</sup>

Criminals in South Africa also use fraudulently acquired firearm licences to buy ammunition directly from dealers.<sup>149</sup> An example is the Stanfield case, where investigators alleged that fraudulently issued firearm licences were used to buy a large amount of ammunition.<sup>150</sup>

In South Africa, criminals can also borrow a firearm licence (which may have been acquired legitimately or fraudulently) to purchase ammunition. As one firearm dealer said:

There are instances where people borrow another person's licence to buy ammunition and some dealers don't check if the name on the licence is correct. It is therefore not inconceivable that gang bosses or other criminal elements, who have been able to (often fraudulently) acquire gun licences, can use them to supply ammunition to criminal foot soldiers with illegal firearms. Also, everyone, including criminals, knows someone with a licence, so accessing ammunition is not difficult.<sup>151</sup>

AK-47 ammunition rounds found at an illegal arms cache by members of the South African police near the Mozambique border. © Halden Krog






# THE CONSUMERS

Criminal networks are the consumers of firearms being sold in illicit markets. Here, a gang member holds a Walther PPK in Cape Town, South Africa. © Shaun Swinger





**T**he availability of illicit firearms within the three countries under review has not only influenced the operations and modus operandi of the more organized criminal groups and networks, but also shapes the operation of the illicit firearm economy more broadly. Although illicit firearms are not solely responsible for the emergence of these networks and groups, they have played a role in shaping their activities and given them more power. Their existence has also undermined the state's ability to deal with the problem.

The criminal networks are consumers of firearms being sold in illicit markets. Some are transnational in nature and operate across the three countries, such as the poaching and hijacking networks. Others are more country specific, such as the gangs and the taxi mafias operating in South Africa. These different types of networks also have varied consumer needs when it comes to firearms. Most engage with this market as consumers, and some are dealers.

## **Drugs, gangs and guns**

In South Africa, organized gangs operate in communities from the Western Cape to Gauteng. Illicit firearm markets have not only played an important role in shaping how these gangs operate but the gangs have played a role in shaping how the illicit firearm economy has developed.

Gangs on the Cape Flats and in other parts of the country, such as the southern areas of Johannesburg, have always had access to firearms, albeit in limited numbers at times. Before 2004, gangs obtained a relatively limited supply of firearms from a variety of sources. These included weapons stolen from victims of gang violence, those seized during house and vehicle robberies, firearms bought from individual state officials and items stolen from private and government institutions. Prior to 1994, available evidence suggests that some gangs aligned themselves to the apartheid government or the liberation parties.<sup>152</sup> This gave them access to firearms available across the political spectrum.

*In South Africa, the upsurge in the availability of firearms appears to have a direct link to the growing drug trade.*

The limited supply of firearms up until 2004 meant that not all gangs and gang members had access to them, and the best items were kept for senior members and their bosses. Excess stocks were either passed on to members or stored for later use. Many of the rank-and-file gang members were forced to make do with knives, pangas and other dangerous objects. Describing this period, one former gang member from Westbury in the west of Johannesburg, said, 'During the old days, guns were not that common among the foot soldiers in gangs. If you had access to a gun, you were considered a main man.'<sup>153</sup>

With firearms in relatively short supply, gang bosses and leaders also had rigorous controls for the available firearms. They would ensure that the guns they did not need were stored at specific locations and only lent to foot soldiers when the need arose, such as during the outbreak of turf wars or for specific activities. These items were later returned, along with any firearms acquired from opponents or victims. There were serious consequences for absconding with a firearm or failing to return it.

However, from about 2004, gangs began to have more access to firearms and members were able to buy weapons directly from gang leaders. The upsurge in the availability of firearms appears to have a direct link to the growing drug trade. Explaining this link, GI-TOC's research into gang violence in the south of Johannesburg refers to a virtuous circle – drug profits enabling gangs to procure more guns, and the guns enabling greater control of drug turf and thus higher profits, used partly to buy guns.<sup>154</sup>

In the Western Cape, the pool of illegal firearms was increased by the bulk distribution of firearms by Prinsloo and his cohorts, as outlined earlier in this report, from about 2008/09. During this time, firearms removed from SAPS central stores and armouries in Gauteng were moved to the Western Cape and sold to different gang leaders, some of them in opposition to each other.

Irshaad Laher, a previous colleague of Prinsloo's who had moved to the Western Cape, assisted Prinsloo with the sale of firearms to the gangs. Laher was not himself involved with the province's gangs but he allegedly had contacts that gave him access to this market and the market quickly gained traction as the word spread.

Major General Jeremy Vearey, former head of Detective Services in the Western Cape, told the GI-TOC:

For years, different people outside the SAPS had been raising the issue of police firearms finding their way into criminals' hands. At the time, many in the police did not want to acknowledge that this was happening on a large scale. Then we started to pick up during our investigations that the gangs seemed to have unlimited access to guns and ammunition, and that something had changed. In the past, one could clearly see that gangs had a limited supply of firearms and ammunition and would guard and value these. Now suddenly we saw a disregard for the amount of ammunition used and they didn't seem to worry as much about losing their guns. That made us suspect they had a pipeline of large stocks of guns and ammunition.<sup>155</sup>

Increased access to firearms, particularly after Prinsloo's network began shipping large consignments to the Western Cape, led to increased gang-related violence from 2009. From 2010 to 2016 the homicide rate in Western Cape increased by 35 per cent, more than double the national increase of 16.4 per cent. During the same period, gun related murders in the province more than doubled.<sup>156</sup>

Prinsloo's gun-running operation to the Western Cape gangs operated for about eight years until 2015, when he was finally arrested. This bulk supply of firearms, together with newer sources of weapons largely facilitated by profits from the growing drug trade, has resulted in gangs now being more heavily armed than ever before.

The influx in firearms also changed the way gang leaders and bosses managed firearms. Whereas in the past, guns were only given to members under strict conditions set by bosses and gang leaders, now almost everyone in a gang had access to a gun. Gang leaders remained in charge but they also became mid-level dealers, making good profits from selling illicit firearms to their own members and smaller gangs as well as other groups such as Chinese criminal networks and criminals in the taxi industry operating in areas controlled by gangs.

There are also indications that some of the firearms accessed by gang bosses have been stockpiled for sale or use at a later time.

The types of guns available to gang bosses is relatively varied, including pistols, revolvers and, to a lesser extent, rifles. One gun that has become relatively prominent within the gangs is the Z88, most likely because it can be easily acquired from state sources. This may also be the result of the large number of Z88s supplied to gangs by the Prinsloo network.

The Z88 gun is a popular firearm among gangs in South Africa. © Julian Rademeyer





Security officers patrol a taxi rank in Durban, South Africa. The taxi industry in the country is marred by high levels of violence that have claimed the lives of taxi bosses, drivers and commuters. © Shaun Swingler

While in South Africa the link between gangs, drugs and guns has become a significant factor in shaping the illicit firearm economy, in Mozambique (which does not have the type of organized gangs seen in South Africa), there is a link between heroin trafficking networks and the illicit trade in firearms. Historically, heroin trafficking networks in northern Mozambique have largely been characterized by low levels of firearm-related violence. This is because of the close-knit nature of the trade and the protection the traffickers receive from police and senior government officials.

However, the trade has now diversified and competition between groups, combined with the presence of Islamist insurgents, may increase the use of illicit firearms and cause more violence.<sup>157</sup> One interviewee said: 'It is well known that Mozambique is a drug corridor, with the north of the country its entry point, especially the province of Cabo Delgado. It is also well known that, in general, where there is drug trafficking there is also arms trafficking. These two things go together.'<sup>158</sup>

There are also indications that there is some collaboration between drug smugglers and insurgents in the north of the country. A BBC report in June 2018 on the insurgents in Cabo Delgado province stated: 'Local smuggling barons incorporated the militant young men into their networks and paid them well.'<sup>159</sup> While there is no direct evidence of smugglers giving weapons to the insurgents, they have provided them with funds that can be used to buy illegal weapons.

## South Africa's taxi mafia

Minibus taxis in South Africa transport 65 per cent of commuters – about 15 million people – every day. The industry generates an annual profit of at least R90 million<sup>160</sup> and despite attempts by the government to bring the industry into the formal sector of the economy, it remains predominantly informal in nature. Local, provincial and national taxi associations largely take responsibility for the regulation of the sector.

The industry is highly competitive, and the number of operators far exceeds demand. This, coupled with the emergence of powerful taxi associations that go to great lengths to protect their own interests and increase their revenues, has led to high levels of violence within the industry and between operators. This conflict has claimed the lives of not only taxi bosses and drivers, but also ordinary commuters.

In a situation similar to that in the gangster underworld, players in the taxi industry were historically able to access firearms through their relationships with either pro- or anti-apartheid forces. However, like the gangs, access to such firearms was far more limited than it is now. During this time, while guns were used in taxi conflicts, particularly in targeted hits on opponents, many taxi wars involved the use of pangas, knives, axes and other dangerous weapons.

In the post-apartheid era, as taxi violence has become more pervasive, the need for guns has increased. A lack of proper regulation of the industry means competitors often turn to violence to resolve conflicts, increasing the demand for illegal firearms.

In KwaZulu-Natal alone, police seized close to 200 firearms in one month (September 2019) in operations focusing on intergroup conflicts, stock theft and taxi violence. Among the firearms seized were 168 handguns, seven shotguns, six rifles and six homemade guns, along with more than 1 081 rounds of ammunition. In the two months prior to this, similar police operations in the province resulted in the seizure of more than 146 firearms.

Power struggles in the industry have created a pool of hitmen, often referred to as *izinkabi*, who are used to attack competitors. The taxi industry accounted for the majority (43 per cent) of targeted assassinations in South Africa from January 2000 to December 2017.<sup>161</sup> The emergence of these taxi hitmen has also fueled the need for more guns. The perpetrators seem to have access to an assortment of firearms. Reports of police seizures of illegal taxi-related firearms as well as interviews conducted with members of the industry provides evidence of how extensive the array of firearms available within the industry is. They include R4s, R5s, LM-4 semi-automatic rifles, Dashprod SAR M14s, AK-47s, Glocks, Z88, Berettas, Norincos and .38 specials.

The .38 special revolver is believed to be especially popular because it is small and easy to conceal, which allows greater access to unsuspecting targets.<sup>162</sup> It also does not throw out spent cartridges at the scene.

The .38 Special Taurus revolver, popular among users due to its convenient small size. © Julian Rademeyer



*The involvement of police officials in the supply of firearms to taxi operators is a cause for concern.*

One police officer interviewed said assault rifles are used mainly in group ambushes while handguns are preferred for drive-by shootings. He stated that weapons that are not abandoned or impounded at crime scenes are usually hidden, sometimes in remote rural areas. 'As expected, ballistics data retrieved at the scene is of little initial use when weapons that have "disappeared" are unavailable to match to forensic evidence,' one police officer said.<sup>163</sup>

Taxis from South Africa also operate across the border, taking customers into neighbouring states. Historically, this has given certain operators access to firearms smuggled into the country from Mozambique, which enables them to increase their own standing and influence within the industry.

The involvement of police officials in the supply of firearms to taxi operators is another cause for concern. In 1998, a member of the SAPS's Special Presidential Taxi Task Team told a journalist that policemen 'hire out their weapons to be used in hits if they don't actually perform the hits themselves.'<sup>164</sup>

In 1999, a commission of inquiry into taxi violence in Soshanguve outside Pretoria heard evidence that police officials were leasing out government property, including firearms, bulletproof vests and police uniforms, to taxi associations for use in their attacks against rivals.<sup>165</sup>

Police do not just rent guns to members of the taxi industry, they also sell industry players their police-issue firearms as well as other weapons seized in the course of their work. In August 2018, a lawyer acting for the South African National Taxi Council told members of the National Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police that the taxi council was concerned about the number of state weapons that had ended up in the hands of taxi hitmen.<sup>166</sup>

In Gauteng in 2015, a police officer was suspended for the Brixton Police Station after being linked to the disappearance of guns including R5 rifles. The officer had allegedly been on a looting spree at the Mayfair West police station, stealing guns and supplying them to hitmen hired by rival taxi bosses and taxi associations.<sup>167</sup>

More recently, in 2015, during Project Impi's investigation into illegal firearm sources, Prinsloo admitted that his network had been involved in supplying firearms taken from police stores to people involved in taxi conflicts in KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>168</sup>

But it is not only police firearms that have found their way into the taxi industry. Weapons from the defence force and private security companies have also ended up there. In an interview, a person associated with violence in the taxi industry said:

We take what is available to use. We buy firearms from army guys, often after they have been on training exercises, and we also get firearms from guys in the private security industry. There is a pub we go to where we meet guys involved in the private security industry and where we can make deals to buy firearms. Sometimes you have a guy operating a security company who has firearms registered to that company. Then, either the company loses a contract and no longer needs so many firearms, or the company closes down. The boss of the company now wants a return on his investment, so he sells the firearms to us.<sup>169</sup>

Easy access to illegal firearms also appears to have made certain *izinkabi* more discerning when it comes to their choice of firearms. The more seasoned operators prefer to buy firearms from police, army and security contacts. A taxi operator said this was because these weapons were less likely to have been used in previous violence and ammunition for them was more available.<sup>170</sup>

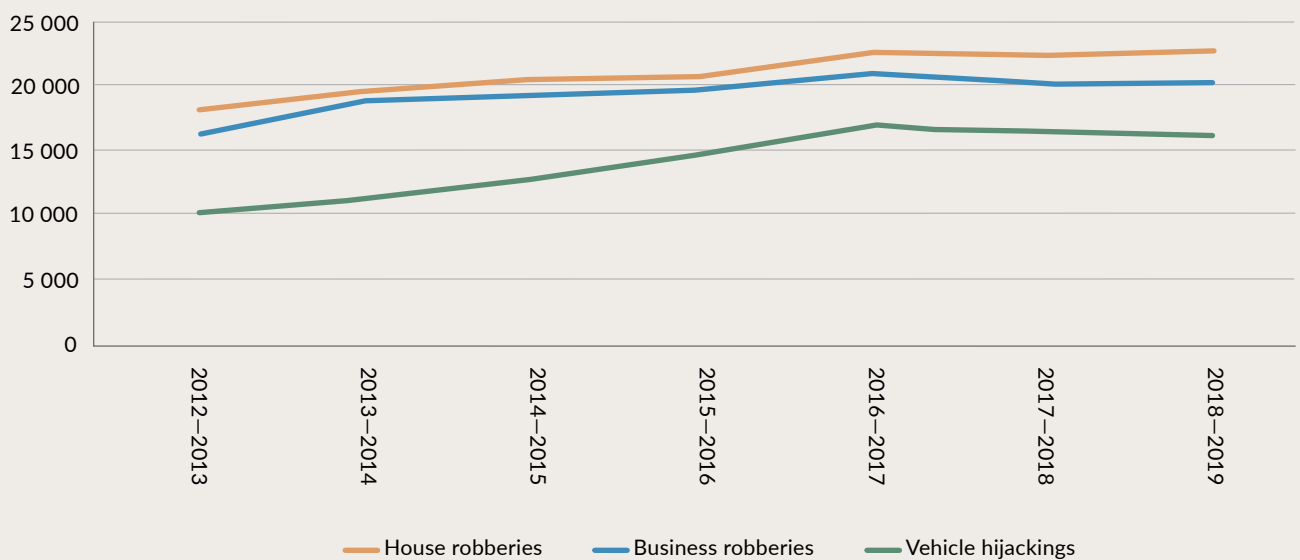
Some of the guns in the taxi network have also been used in crimes outside the industry. The most recent example of this was in the assassination of prominent Cape Town lawyer Piet Malik, who was gunned down outside his children's school in October 2018. The head of Western Cape Detective services said the hitmen were taxi industry operators from KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>171</sup>

## At gun point: Armed robbery networks

Armed robberies or robbery with aggravating circumstances (as it is officially known in South Africa) describes situations where criminals use a weapon to commit a robbery. In some cases, knives are used, but most criminals use firearms to commit these crimes.<sup>172</sup> Some are carried out by relatively small groups of opportunistic criminals who source individual firearms on the streets or steal them, while others are committed by more organized groups with access to an array of firearms.

While all three countries are affected by this form of crime, South Africa experiences the highest number of armed robberies, with an average of 384 armed robberies being recorded each day.<sup>173</sup> These involve both street robberies and what the South African police term 'trio crimes' – vehicle hijackings, house robberies and business robberies.

Since 2012/13, there has been a significant increase in the number of trio crimes recorded by the police in South Africa, as shown in Figure 9.



**FIGURE 9** South African trio crimes recorded from 2012/13 to 2018/19.

SOURCE: SAPS crime statistics presentation, Crime Situation in Republic of South Africa 12 months (April to March 2018–19), [https://www.saps.gov.za/services/april\\_to\\_march2018\\_19\\_presentation.pdf](https://www.saps.gov.za/services/april_to_march2018_19_presentation.pdf)

In some cases, the armed robberies may occur within South Africa but the organized groups responsible are transnational in nature, often involving citizens from the three countries. An example is vehicle hijackings, which often involve nationals of all three countries. Some of the hijacked vehicles are moved across the borders into Mozambique or Zimbabwe where they are either sold on local markets or shipped to other destinations. Hijackers are often involved in other crimes. For example, some of the gangs operating in Eldorado Park, south of Johannesburg, have been linked to both the theft and hijacking of vehicles and to the drug trade.

In August 2019, a South African National Hijacking Prevention Academy report on vehicle hijacking said many of the criminals involved in these hijackings were part of well-established syndicates who ran their businesses along business principles and 'based on thorough planning'. The report explains how vehicles are sourced on demand and resold to predetermined buyers, often being smuggled out of the country.<sup>174</sup>

The report's information is supported by the Institute for Security Studies Justice and Violence Prevention division head, Gareth Newham, who believes that most hijackings are connected to organized criminal syndicates:

Hijacking has been a problem for many years. The key factors are the existence of organized crime syndicates who are able to process hijacked cars and resell them locally and internationally, driven by high levels of corruption in the criminal justice system, border control and transport-related departments and of course the availability of young men willing to commit hijackings.<sup>175</sup>

In most cases, handguns are used to hijack vehicles, although the police say that the seizure of weapons linked to hijacking shows that the perpetrators have access to an array of weapons, including semi-automatic rifles.<sup>176</sup> A former Netstar Vehicle Recovery contractor confirmed this, saying that on average his company recovers about 100 firearms a year, seized during the commission of crimes or found in recovered cars and at crime scenes. The contractor gave a breakdown of the types of firearms recovered, as below.

- AK-47s: only three or four a year.
- R4 and R5 rifles: about 10 a year.
- Norincos: about one out of every 10 guns found.
- Z88: the most common guns – about two to three out of every 10 found.
- A variety of other 9 mm firearms.

While some hijackers source their own firearms, many people involved in hijacking syndicates would buy or have their firearms supplied to them by their network. Some would be legal firearms taken from victims while others would be sourced in illicit firearm markets. Robberies are also carried out with the express purpose of accessing firearms. A case in point was the theft of 100 firearms in an armed robbery in Gauteng at a Boksburg firearm dealership in February 2019. Police investigating the case expressed concern that the stolen guns could be used by criminals involved in hijackings and residential and business robberies.



Although the array of firearms used by criminal networks involved in house, business and vehicle robberies is extensive, this does not compare to the firepower available to perpetrators of cash-in-transit heists, which are well-planned criminal operations, often carried out with military-style planning and precision.

In 2017, the Institute for Security Studies said this was one of the fastest growing forms of aggravated robbery in South Africa, posing a significant threat to public safety and the economy.<sup>177</sup> Between 2014 and 2017, the number of cash-in-transit heists increased by a massive 110 per cent, with 179 heists taking place in 2014 and 376 in 2017.<sup>178</sup> This figure decreased by 22 per cent in 2018, with 292 incidents reported.<sup>179</sup> However, in the first month and half of 2020 there was at least one such heist a day, and 35 recorded between January and early February 2020.<sup>180</sup>

Research conducted in 2006 describes how some of the networks involved in these heists live by the motto *Sibindi uya phelisa, sibindi*, which, loosely translated, means 'bravery can kill you or it can give you life'.<sup>181</sup> It also describes how most criminals involved in heists know they could face serious opposition from the armed private security companies and the police, making it essential that they are well armed and the operations are properly planned.<sup>182</sup> It is therefore not surprising that these gangs have access to a range of firearms including revolvers, pistols and automatic and semi-automatic rifles. Recent reports also indicate that some have added commercial explosives to their arsenals, which are used to blow up armoured vehicles.<sup>183</sup>

The 2006 research also points to networks involved in heists having specific people within the network responsible for accessing firearms, arranging storage and maintaining them, particularly the automatic and semi-automatic rifles.<sup>184</sup>

SABRIC, which tracks cash-in-transit heists on behalf of the banks, provides some important insights, which are listed below.

- Between 2003 and 2006, the AK-47 was the weapon of choice.
- After 2006 this changed, and until about 2016/17 the use of R4 and R5 rifles was predominant in such heists, with AK-47s becoming less common.
- In 2019 and 2020, R4s and R5s were still popular, but use of AK-47s was increasing. However, there is a difference between the type of AK-47 used in 2003 to 2006 and that being used today. The older guns could have been used in conflicts in Mozambique or were stock left over from apartheid. Those used today are more sophisticated.<sup>185</sup> SABRIC reports that Dashprod and LM rifles are also now being used in cash-in-transit heists.<sup>186</sup>

The type of weapons used by cash-in-transit criminals provides a useful insight into the possible sources of those firearms. The use of R4 and R5, which are police and SANDF issue weapons, clearly come from state sources. Some may have been taken by force from police and army officers, but the trend suggests that police and army employees are complicit in these heists. In 2018, the Minister of Defence, in a written reply to a question in parliament, admitted that weapons stolen from the SANDF had been used in cash-in-transit heists. The minister also said that to combat the theft and loss of SANDF firearms and ammunition, a decision had been taken at a security cluster meeting<sup>187</sup> that counter-intelligence operatives must regularly inspect firearms and a guard duty system be introduced.<sup>188</sup>

*Trends suggest that police and army employees are complicit in cash-in-transit heists.*

The Dashprod and LM rifles are used extensively by private security companies, especially those involved in the transportation of cash and other high-value goods. These firearms could have been stolen from security guards by cash-in-transit thieves. SABRIC maintains that in 80 per cent of such heists, the gangs steal security guards' firearms,<sup>189</sup> but they may also come from leakages within security companies.

While the sources of the R4, R5, Dashprod and LM rifles are clear, the source of the newer AK-47s is less so. Some firearms experts interviewed believe they could be sourced locally as they are used by special force members in the police and army and certain private security companies. Others say they could have been smuggled from Zimbabwe or Mozambique into South Africa. In December 2017, seven AK-47 rifles and 80 rounds of ammunition, believed to be destined for use in cash-in-transit robberies, were intercepted at the Lebombo border with Mozambique. The weapons, neatly wrapped in plastic, were smuggled in a Toyota Hilux.<sup>190</sup>

Vehicles used to transport cash should, in theory, be able to withstand certain types of gunfire but some gangs have been using armour-piercing ammunition.<sup>191</sup> These rounds are not allowed to be stocked by firearm dealers and are not easily accessible to the public. One expert said they were likely to come from state stocks or were being smuggled into the country from neighbouring countries.<sup>192</sup>

Unlike general robberies, there is a relatively smaller pool of people involved in cash-in-transit heists. Researcher Maligny Thobane describes cash-in-transit heists as 'crime generators', saying it takes several other crimes to pull off a successful heist. The gang relies on people involved in the heist to access stolen or hijacked vehicles as well as firearms and ammunition and the cash needed to pay off police officers and/or private security guards.<sup>193</sup>

## Kidnappings and abductions

The first reported case of kidnapping for ransom in Mozambique occurred in 2008 when a Dutch woman was held captive for 18 hours before her husband paid a US\$20,000 ransom, negotiated down from \$100,000.<sup>194</sup> Although many kidnapping cases are not reported, those that have been show that the number of incidents increased steadily from 2008, peaking in 2013 and 2014, before slightly declining between 2015 and 2019. However, in early 2020 alone, there were eight reported cases.<sup>195</sup> These kidnappings, which are often carried out in broad daylight by heavily armed groups, initially occurred in Maputo and Matola but have since spread to other urban areas, including Beira, Chimoio and Nampula.<sup>196</sup> There is growing evidence indicating that police and military officers work closely with kidnapping gangs, not only supplying them with firearms but also high-level protection.<sup>197</sup>

In Zimbabwe, heavily armed groups have been involved in the abduction of political opponents of the state as well as human rights activists. According to one human rights lawyer, military grade assault rifles have been used in these abductions.<sup>198</sup>



## The big guns: Poaching networks

Over the decade to 2020, 9 442 African rhinos have been poached, with more than 7 200 of these occurring in South Africa. Officials at Kruger National Park estimate that there may be as many as seven to eight poaching incursions into the park every day.<sup>199</sup> The poaching of elephants is also rife in Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Up to 2014, Mozambique lost about 1 200 elephants a year to poaching. Although the number declined between 2015 and 2019, an average of 360 elephants a year were killed.<sup>200</sup>

Networks involved in rhino and elephant poaching mostly use high-powered big ball hunting rifles. These have more than three times the force of a round fired from an AK-47 or an R4 or R5. The .375 and .458 calibre hunting rifles can kill a rhino with a single shot fired from a distance.

In Mozambique, poaching networks use weapons acquired from two main sources – those that are under the jurisdiction of the Mozambique state and those smuggled into the country. One investigative journalist interviewed estimated that about 90 per cent of all the firearms used for poaching in Mozambique were legally imported for use by the state security services, while only 10 per cent were sourced directly from illicit regional and international arms markets.<sup>201</sup>

The illicit firearms trade in southern Africa enables the activities of poaching networks in the region. Here, a .303 hunting rifle is smuggled from South Africa to Zimbabwe.

*Photo: Courtesy of Julian Rademeyer*

*Mozambique's illicit arms market closely mirrors the stocks available in military and police armouries.*

In Massingir, state firearms used in poaching were reported missing from the Casa Militar (the president's personal protection force) during the presidency of Armando Guebuza (2005–2015). Others were traced to the basic military training centre in Munguine, Manhiça district, Maputo province and the Marine Corps base in Maputo.<sup>202</sup> A police officer from Chibuto, Gaza province, also noted that between 2016 and 2017, dozens of confiscated weapons went missing from the Police District Command in Massingir but nobody was ever convicted of theft.<sup>203</sup> Another police officer in Maputo noted that confiscated firearms are often sold back to poachers at elevated prices.<sup>204</sup>

Poachers in northern Mozambique, who obtain illicit firearms and ammunition from government sources (such as the military or police), often agree to pay a fixed price for a weapon but sometimes they agree to pay for the firearm with profit from their activities.<sup>205</sup> A representative from the National Conservation Areas Administration said that the profits from poaching are sometimes split 50/50 between the poacher and the provider (often police or border guards) for the use of the firearm.<sup>206</sup> This pricing model appears to be quite common and there are generals in the FADM who rent out their own rifles, which are legal and licensed, for sport hunting purposes. The poachers then return the rifle to the general along with the horns or tusks of an animal they have killed. They receive a proportion of the profits from selling the bounty on the black market.<sup>207</sup>

Recently, conservation workers in Mozambique have noted an increase in the use of AK-47s and semi-automatic SKS rifles by poachers.<sup>208</sup> Anti-poaching patrols in northern Mozambique say they are also seeing newer versions of the AK-47s,<sup>209</sup> most likely sourced from state stockpiles. These observations have been echoed by numerous interviewees, suggesting that Mozambique's illicit arms market closely mirrors the stocks available in military and police armouries.

Heavy hunting rifles, such as .375 and .458 calibre firearms, are also smuggled into Mozambique by poaching syndicates from Tanzania<sup>210</sup> and China.<sup>211</sup> In Tanzania, these are believed to be sourced from state armouries.<sup>212</sup> Some of the firearms from China are used for poaching in Mozambique or are smuggled into Kruger National Park in South Africa by Chinese intermediaries who bring them into regional ports in containers.<sup>213</sup>

There is a complex flow between illicit firearms and illicit firearm markets in Mozambique. In Gorongosa, for example, poaching activity is less controlled since the opposition RENAMO party agreed to the Peace and National Reconciliation Agreement in August 2019.<sup>214</sup> Prior to this, poaching activity in the area was controlled by RENAMO members. Similarly, poachers in Niassa province have been seen with assault rifles, which may be a spillover from the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. One conservation director working in northern Mozambique mentioned that former members of Tanzania's poaching gangs had joined the insurgency in Cabo Delgado after Chinese purchases of elephant ivory from northern Mozambique waned as a result of anti-poaching interventions by President Nyusi and the Chinese government.<sup>215</sup> As one interviewee noted: 'This is worrying, as they are good trackers and know the area well. They also know where all the [police] posts are and could provide a potential new source of regional firearms for the insurgents.'<sup>216</sup>

In South Africa, the type of hunting rifles used by poaching networks seems to vary depending on where the poachers are operating in. In the Kruger National Park, which has borne the brunt of rhino poaching in the region, the CZ hunting rifle produced by Česká Zbrojovka Uherský Brod, the Czech Republic's largest gun manufacturer, appears to be particularly popular. In fact, a February 2020 report published by Ashwell Glasson, head of Academic Policy and Sector Advancement at the Southern African Wildlife College, stated that between 2014 and 2018, 22.28 per cent of all firearms seized from poachers in and around the Kruger National Park were CZ hunting rifles.<sup>217</sup> It is also the most popular hunting rifle in South Africa.

One firearm dealer interviewed said this is not surprising: 'The CZ would be to big game hunting what the Toyota Land Cruiser is to off-road vehicle enthusiasts. It is rugged and durable and can have a lifespan of 50 to 60 years.'<sup>218</sup>

Poaching networks get access to these hunting rifles a number of ways:

- Some are stolen in attacks on farmers. Criminals would then sell any hunting rifles stolen during these attacks to poaching networks.
- CZ hunting rifles used by poachers are trafficked into the country from Mozambique. According to Glasson's February 2020 report, 85 per cent of CZ rifles seized in and around the Kruger National Park could be traced back to Mozambique where there is a significant stockpile of CZ rifles.<sup>219</sup> Both the country's Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Agriculture stock these rifles and it appears that certain officials have either sold or rented some of them to poachers.<sup>220</sup>
- Corrupt police officials have also been involved in selling or renting rifles seized during anti-poaching activities to poachers.

Poaching networks in South Africa use silencers on their hunting rifles. Historically, these silencers were relatively crude, but they have become more sophisticated. They tend to be legally manufactured silencers or relatively well-developed home-made devices. Either way, skills are required to fit the silencer onto the rifle.

One gun dealer said: 'Anyone can buy a silencer, and the sale of silencers is not legislated. However, to fit it is a problem. If you are building a silencer, it has to thread through the rifle. You can't do it by hand, and you can't do it in the backyard. It requires precision, so you need to have access to skilled artisans with the right equipment.'<sup>221</sup> This would imply poachers do have access to skilled gunsmiths who can do this.

People previously employed in state armouries or in the private sector may have these skills. However, increasingly there are also reports of unscrupulous gun dealers and gunsmiths who are prepared to cooperate with criminal networks in this regard. One security consultant involved in anti-poaching work said: 'Yes, definitely there are a few dealers who are involved with poaching networks. Some are also involved in firearm deals in other parts of Africa, where the lines between legal and illegal are grey at best. For these guys, it is not a big step to become involved in the black market at home.'<sup>222</sup>

In South Africa, the modus operandi of poaching networks has evolved to accommodate the changing environment in which they operate. In most instances, there are different layers within the network, with the lowest layer being those who actually kill the animals. In South Africa, many of these foot soldiers are South Africans or Mozambican recruits. They are expected to take the biggest risk for the least reward.

Within conservation circles, there is some debate about just how sophisticated these foot soldiers are. Some conservation bodies say they are sophisticated and well-versed in military tactics. Others argue that their militaristic abilities are exaggerated. But many have never fired a gun before going on patrol. The reality is likely to be somewhere in between. But it is believed that some poaching networks have started giving recruits some basic training.

It is also not unheard for some poachers to carry semi-automatic firearms on poaching patrols although this is more in the case of a firefight with anti-poaching units or state forces than to kill animals with.

In most instances, firearms used in poaching are controlled by leaders or senior members of poaching networks. They charge the foot soldiers doing the killing for the use of both the firearm and the ammunition that will be used. This fee is, more often than not, taken off the money paid to the poachers once the bounty is handed over.

A number of the more senior people involved in poaching networks have been able to develop political connections with certain politicians and people in authority in both Mozambique and South Africa. These connections not only offer these networks a degree of protection but may assist them in accessing firearms.

## **New kids on the block: The construction mafia**

Gun markets are constantly evolving with new players emerging who contribute to shaping the illicit firearm economy. While their emergence is not based solely on their access to illicit firearms, the availability of these weapons has played a critical role in shaping their operations and impact. There are also deep rooted social and political conditions that have led them down this path.

In South Africa, one such emerging group is what has become known as the 'construction mafia'. Groups of people calling themselves 'local business forums', invade construction sites to demand a stake in projects being implemented. They are heavily armed (often carrying automatic and semi-automatic assault rifles) and they use intimidatory tactics to ensure their demands are met.

The construction mafia emerged in KwaZulu-Natal in late 2015 and early 2016, when groups of people invaded construction sites demanding not only a percentage of the construction contract but also that construction companies employ certain people linked to them on the sites. Their activities soon spread to other parts of the country. In April 2019, the South African Forum of Civil Engineering Contractors (SAFCEC) said that at least 183 infrastructure and construction projects nationally, worth more than R63 billion, had been disrupted by these groups.<sup>223</sup>

Although apartheid officially ended in 1994 and measures were introduced to address its social consequences, many areas of the economy remain relatively untransformed, which has led to calls by some groups for radical economic transformation. Weak economic growth has led to rising unemployment and growing income inequalities. There has also been an impatience for change in many communities where poverty is pervasive, and people remain on the margins of the mainstream economy.

In these communities, a growing sense of exclusion and alienation has resulted in disillusionment and anger. The lack of economic transformation coupled with poor economic growth has created fertile ground for criminal elements who exploit these conditions to justify their actions. This is the context of the so-called business forums, who, by invading construction sites, say they are only implementing the principles of radical economic transformation.

However, most people in the construction sector feel it is important to distinguish between legitimate efforts by people or groups wanting to participate in large development projects in their area, and criminal groups who have resorted to extortion to line their own pockets.<sup>224</sup> SAFCEC CEO Webster Mfebe said: 'While a lot of it happens under the mantra of radical economic transformation, extortionist behaviour has affected both black- and white-owned companies, which tells you it is all about the money .... We are teaching our children that they don't have to work. They just have to carry the biggest gun.'<sup>225</sup> Supporting this view, Roy Mnisi, the chairperson of South African Master Builders Association, said:

These forums masquerade as people, a formation fighting against economic exclusion in the construction sector. But they are not. If you look at their modus operandi, they attack all sites, including sites with local general contractors, many of whom are small and medium-sized enterprises and companies owned by previously disadvantaged individuals. They intimidate contractors everywhere.<sup>226</sup>

Mfebe observes that targeting the construction industry is not dissimilar to the emergence of the taxi mafia. He said that in an environment where competition is rife, you can get ahead either by engaging in widespread economic corruption or, if you do not have resources to do this, you can capture the state and country at gunpoint using structures such as these so-called business forums.<sup>227</sup>

Describing how some of these local businesses operate, one construction manager said that men from one of these groups would storm a construction site and demand to see the 'boss':

Each of the men have their own company and tell you that you must employ four skilled and four unskilled workers from them. On top of that you must give each of them R5000 a fortnight to ensure there are no disruptions. That money is nothing but protection fees .... At one construction site a group of men gave the owner of the company an AK-47 bullet and said this bullet was worth R17 and that is the cost of your life if you do not comply with us.<sup>228</sup>

In KwaZulu-Natal, these business forums have also become embroiled in government departments' internal processes, particularly those related to investigations and disciplinary action in their supply chain divisions. In March 2018, business forum members disrupted the disciplinary hearing of eThekweni municipality deputy head

of supply chain management, Zandile Sithole, who was accused of accepting bribes worth more than R2 million from companies contracted to the municipality. Armed men stormed the venue where the hearings were being held and threatened the presiding officer, demanding Sithole's reinstatement.

A few months later, 40 armed members of a 'business forum' stormed into a high-level meeting between KwaZulu-Natal health officials and the Treasury's Intervention Team, which had been deployed by provincial authorities to address serious breaches of the Public Finance Management Act within the health department. The group demanded tenders and the reinstatement of a suspended official.

During a dispute between these groups and the eThekweni Metropolitan council, one forum leader was caught on video telling the deputy city manager, 'We don't have time to play. We are not scared to get arrested. We didn't hand over all the guns. We still have some of the guns. Don't mess around with us.'<sup>229</sup>

One developer interviewed told the GI-TOC that some construction managers, supervisors and developers had started to carry their own guns on site. 'But this hasn't really helped much because what is a handgun when faced with people carrying assault rifles?'<sup>230</sup>

A member of one of these so-called business forums told the GI-TOC that there are former convicts and taxi operators who carry guns for their own protection within these groups. There are two major observations emanating from this information:

- The Firearms Control Act (Act 60 of 2000) precludes people with a criminal conviction from possessing a licensed firearm, which suggests that those in the business forums would be carrying firearms illegally.
- According to media reports and interviews conducted, some of the firearms carried by forum members are semi-automatic and automatic rifles. The Firearms Control Act says these types of weapons are not allowed to be carried for self defence. This suggests that 'business forum' members carrying semi-automatic rifles could be accessing them from the illicit market.

Clear links exist between some of these groups and the taxi industry, with some in the taxi industry being used to enforce internal disciplinary measures within the forums.<sup>231</sup> This relationship may explain how local 'business forum' members are able to access firearms. Some of these groups are also linked to other criminal networks. There are also reports of former combatants getting involved in these activities.

Other new players in the illicit arms economy are the insurgents who have operated in Cabo Delgado since October 2017. Their activities have led to the deaths of more than 1 271 people.<sup>232</sup> In the early days, these insurgents used rudimentary weapons such as pangas and machetes,<sup>233</sup> but as their activities expanded and their influence grew, their inventory has become more sophisticated and most recent deaths have been the result of gunshots. They have not only taken advantage of Mozambique's porous borders, especially the maritime borders, to import illicit arms, but have also been able to source weapons locally.

Their operations are still relatively opaque but, according to one expert, ISIS propaganda (images and short videos) released by the insurgents show them with:<sup>234</sup>




- 75 AK-47 assault rifles
- Eight PKM-style machine guns
- Five RPD-style light machine guns
- 13 RPG-7 rocket launchers
- Seven Type-69 rocket launchers
- A W85 machine gun
- An AGS-17 grenade launcher
- A QLZ-87 grenade launcher
- Two 60 mm mortars
- Six unidentified pistols

Indications are that most of their weapons are locally sourced and being transported to Cabo Delgado from other parts of Mozambique. In April 2020, two commercial vehicles were found near Mueda in north-eastern Mozambique, with arms hidden in a deep freeze. Another large truck was stopped 18 months ago and found to be transporting firearms from Nacala, most likely headed for Cabo Delgado.<sup>235</sup> One interviewee noted that the area around Nampula and Angoche, especially the refugee camp in Nampula, has become a hotbed of extremism and a source of recruits for the insurgency and a source of illicit arms.<sup>236</sup>



# GUNS AND MONEY

Ammunition stored in a firearms dealership in Mpumalanga province, South Africa.  
© Shaun Swingler



**T**he illicit trade in firearms, as with any black-market trade, is subject to inflation and market forces. In this context, the price of illegal firearms varies according to several factors including the availability of stock, who is involved in the transactions and the origin of the firearm. In South Africa in the late 1990s, for example, an AK-47 originating from Mozambique or distributed during the apartheid era sold for between R500 and R1 200.<sup>237</sup> However, the prices have increased on the back of inflation and declining stockpiles of these weapons. Interviews suggest that gang bosses, taxi industry bosses, hitmen and cash-in-transit robbers are able to buy an AK-47 for anything from R8 000 to R12 000.

At the end of Mozambique's civil war, an AK-47 could be bought for about US\$6, the equivalent of a bag of maize.<sup>238</sup> However, as the availability of the weapons gradually decreased, prices rose. Prices in Mozambique also appear to fluctuate widely based on a number of factors, such as the region in which the weapon is being sold, the age and the condition of the product and who is selling it, as is evident in some of the examples below:

- In 2004, an AK-47 with a full magazine could be bought in Mozambique for R500 (about US\$75 currently).<sup>239</sup>
- In 2012, some FADM soldiers in Maputo province were selling AK-47s stolen from their base to a criminal arms dealer for 23 000 meticaïs (about US\$750).<sup>240</sup>
- In November 2015, a woman in Matola was arrested for attempting to sell an AK-47 for 30 000 meticaïs (about US\$660).<sup>241</sup>
- The 2012 and 2013 prices quoted above seem to be significantly higher than other prices disclosed in interviews, which put the price of an AK-47 in 2013 at about 2 500 meticaïs (US\$83), and in 2018 the price for the same type of firearm being sold at the Xipamanine market in Maputo at US\$100.<sup>242</sup>

In South Africa, R4s and R5s, which were historically considered scarcer than AK-47s, initially sold for slightly higher prices than an AK-47. In 2006, a journalist from the *Mail & Guardian* was told that an R4 rifle could be bought on the street for about R4 000.<sup>243</sup> While this price has since increased, criminal actors still seem to have access to a well-priced supply of R4 and R5 guns, and to a lesser extent, LM4 and LM5 series rifles.

The prices are also affected by how many times a weapon changes hands and whose hands it moves through, which may determine the mark up. The original price of the weapon is seldom known. Gang bosses appear to have established their own cartels for such transactions, often colluding even with their rivals to set the street prices for these firearms. The markup can be between 50 per cent and 150 per cent.

Type of firearm	Purchase price by gang boss	Resale street price
Norinco QSZ-92	R4 000	R10 000
Astra	R5 000	R12 000
Taurus	R5 000	R12 000
CZ75	R6 000	R13 500
7.65	R5 500	R13 500
Beretta	R6 000	R15 000
Z88	R5 000	R15 000
Glock	R7 000	R19 000
Desert Eagle	R9 000	R20 000
.38 Special	R3 000	R7 000
.357 Magnum	R3 000	R8 500
.44 Magnum	R3 000	R10 000
Shotgun	R4 000	R9 000
AK-47	R8 000	R27 500
LM5	R8 000	R23 500

**FIGURE 10** Prices for firearms bought and sold by gang bosses, South Africa, 2010–2016.

NOTE: The figures relate to bulk shipment of guns received during the time when the Prinsloo network was active (2010 to 2016).

Knowing about the involvement of gang bosses in marking up the prices of illegal firearms sold on the street is important in understanding the illegal firearms market in South Africa. As GI-TOC director Mark Shaw puts it, ‘The incentive for a few well-connected criminal players to access pools of weapons is enormous. The point of accessing the weapons is not so much to arm the gangs themselves, although this is a sub-feature, but to make a profit, to sell the weapons on to the hungry market of those who, in the wider criminal economy, need a firearm. In gangland everyone needs to be packing.’<sup>244</sup>

Trying to match the price of illicit firearms against legal prices is a relatively difficult task. Not only does the price of a firearm vary between the dealers and people selling it, but different brands of firearms have different models. In the legal market, the price will be determined by the brand as well as the model, which are both clearly advertised by dealers. However, in the illegal market, there is information about brands but not about the different models. The pricing of second-hand guns, which are the dominant type of weapons traded in the illicit markets, is even more complicated. The sale is not only dependent on the make and model and who is selling the firearm, but also on its condition and the demand for second-hand weapons. One dealer in South Africa said that, as a general rule, a second-hand firearm in relatively good condition would sell for between 50 per cent to 75 per cent of the price of a new one.

Below are some of the current South African prices of firearms sold on the legal market versus prices cited during interviews conducted on the Cape Flats in the Western Cape in 2018 with regard to firearm sales involving gangs.<sup>245</sup>

- A new CZ 9 mm PARA 75 P07 currently sells in the legal market for between R10 000 and R12 000 and a second-hand version of the same model (in good condition) sells for between R5 000 and R6 500. A gang boss can access a CZ 9 mm pistol on the black market for about R6 000 and will often sell it on to gang members or other parties for between R13 000 and R13 500.
- The cheaper new Glock 9 mm pistol will sell on the legal market for between R9 000 and R15 000, while a second-hand one will sell for between R5 500 and R7 000. Gang bosses appear to be able to access a Glock 9 mm for R7 000 and could resell the firearm for as much as R19 000.
- A new Beretta 9 mm 92 pistol, used extensively by the SAPS, will sell on the legal market for between R9 500 and R14 500 and a second-hand firearm in good condition will sell for between R6 500 and R7 500. Gang bosses can access a Beretta 9 mm pistol for about R6 000 and resell it for R15 000.

In most instances, gang bosses on the Cape Flats access firearms for prices close to what they would be sold for in the second-hand legal market. But they then mark them up significantly when reselling them. Shaw, writing about the role of gang bosses in inflating prices, says, 'Their aim is maximum profit, and it is possible that in a hidden market, there is more latitude for upping prices given that there is not full transparency in pricing at all times'. Shaw also refers to gang bosses who are able to purchase large quantities of guns engaging in price fixing by holding back their stocks to maximize profit.<sup>246</sup>

In South Africa, it is not only gang bosses who have direct access to the original black-market source of the firearm; people involved in taxi violence in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, as well as cash-in-transit robbers, also appear to have access to these weapons as they enter the illicit market.

A comparison of prices paid by other players such as cash-in-transit gangs and those involved in taxi violence shows they are not that far apart. For example, a perpetrator of taxi violence in Gauteng said he could buy a Norinco QSZ-92 for between R3 500 and R4 000 while interviews conducted in 2018 suggest gang bosses paid about R4 000 for the same type of gun. Similarly, some gangsters involved in heists seem to be able access an AK-47, R4 or R5 rifles for between R8 000 and R10 000, while gang bosses pay about R8 000 for an AK-47.


Another factor that can influence the price of a firearm on the illicit market is whether it has been used recently in a crime. For instance, a consultant working for the GI-TOC in Cape Town was told by a gang member that he knew someone who was willing to sell his illicit firearms for as little as a few hundred rand, even though these typically sell for R7 000 to R10 000. This appears to be because the firearm had been used to commit crimes and the seller was worried about it being traced to these crimes. Rental costs vary based on how long the firearm will be kept and where the rental takes place.



# CLEANING UP

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Weapons linked to suspects of a murder conspiracy in South Africa, January 2014. The illicit firearm economy in the region fuels criminal activity and is a threat to political stability. © Alon Skuy



**T**he illicit firearm economy constitutes a serious threat to the stability of Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Networks in this market not only fuel criminal activities; they are also a threat to political stability.

Governments need to be much more proactive about controlling this illicit trade, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, in recognition of the fact that the issue threatens their mandate to create stability within their borders and, by extension, the region.

All three countries are signatories to international and regional treaties and each country has in place legislation to control firearms. They have also embarked on a number of local and regional initiatives designed to reduce the availability of illicit firearms. However, despite this, the illicit firearm economy appears to be flourishing.

Over the past 20 years, all three countries have been through a process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration as part of managing the end of conflict situations. But weaknesses in aspects of these processes have allowed firearms used in political conflicts to leak into the illicit economy, where they end up in the hands of criminals, among others. At the same time, there are indications that these older weapons are being replaced by newer firearms that are also entering illicit markets.

Zimbabwe has been particularly irresponsible in fuelling the illicit arms economy by selling old weapons to civilians without proper controls or monitoring for their use and ownership. This has contributed to crime and political violence. The more recent militarization of the state, which included the mass importation of arms for distribution to security forces and ruling party supporters in the later years of the Robert Mugabe administration, has also been a problem in this regard.

Historically, the illicit cross-border trade in firearms has significantly contributed to the problem. But increasingly, firearms being circulated in the illicit economy are being sourced locally. The primary source of these appears to be through the diversion of weapons from government stocks through theft and other means as well as from private security stocks and the theft of licensed firearms from individuals.

All three countries under review here have firearms control legislation in place that imposes restrictions on civilian ownership of firearms. However, weaknesses in the implementation of this legislation and corruption have undermined its effectiveness

and helped to fuel the illicit firearm economy. This is a particular problem within the private security industry although state officials are fast becoming some of the biggest dealers in these markets. Other drivers are:

- A lack of transparency and accountability in keeping track of state-held firearms, which has enabled the diversion of these arms into illicit markets.
- The poor reporting of missing or stolen state firearms, which contributes to the culture of impunity that exists in all three countries.
- Problems with the physical security of states' armouries and stores, coupled with poor inventory practices, which have enabled the diversion of state-owned firearms.
- The hollowing out of state organizations such as the SAPS's Central Firearm Registry by poor management and systemic corruption.

The three countries are signatories to the 2001 Southern African Development Community Protocol, which seeks to prevent and combat the illicit manufacturing of firearms, ammunition and other such materials. The United Nations has also developed clear norms and standards on this issue. However, such protocols require proper implementation to make them effective. None of the three countries under review has implemented the terms of the protocols, or if they have done so, they have not enforced them. Weak controls as well as lack of monitoring and reporting of state losses of arms and ammunition within the three countries is a major contributing factor to proliferation of the illicit firearms market.

The demand for illicit weapons is also growing as organized criminal networks mushroom and new insurgencies emerge. Although the availability of illicit firearms is not solely responsible for the emergence of these networks and groups, it is increasingly shaping how they operate. Having access to weapons makes these groups more violent and powerful, and undermines the state's ability to deal with them.

## Recommendations

- The new SADC protocol emphasizes effective measures that can be taken by member states regarding the safe management of firearms, including the stockpiling and maintenance of government firearms; proper record keeping of weapons that have been lost, stolen, recovered, seized or destroyed; and the marking and tracking of firearms held by the state. None of the three countries appear to be implementing the terms of the protocol and the situation will not improve unless proper norms and standards regarding the safe management of firearms is addressed.

While the revised protocol provides more detail than the previous protocol on actions to be taken to address the problem, the challenge is the lack of implementation, not the protocol itself. For it to be effective, countries need to act on its provisions. The SADC Secretariat will be establishing a task team to develop an action plan that will include timelines and responsibilities for implementation of the protocol and it will be important that this process is made as transparent as possible to ensure member states can be held accountable.



- The task team established to oversee the implementation of the protocol has recognized the resource constraints faced by many member states. As a result, its work will include assessing their needs and capacity and helping them to source funding to implement the terms of the protocol. The success of the revised protocol will be dependent on the SADC Secretariat working with the task team to secure the necessary resources to enable member states to fully implement the action plans.

While the countries under review did have some structures in place to address the management of firearms before the revised SADC protocol was drawn up, what is lacking is the implementation of these structures and protocols. Where the suggested structures do not exist, countries need to find a way to put them in place. Where they do exist, all government departments and relevant institutions need to have mechanisms in place to ensure they are adhered to and that there are consequences for non-compliance.

To break the cycle of impunity related to state officials' involvement in diverting firearms, it is essential that state departments and institutions that possess state firearms and/or store them on behalf of the state put in place regular reporting mechanisms that will allow officials to be held accountable for firearms under their control. Investigative capacity needs to be improved to ensure proper investigations into reported losses. Again, there must be consequences for proven cases of negligence or corruption. Corruption thrives in environments shrouded in secrecy and lack of transparency and it is essential that processes and reporting methods are as transparent as possible. Parliaments in the three countries could play an important role in this regard. Better control of ammunition will help to disrupt the illicit firearm economy. Therefore, it is necessary for the three governments to put in place stricter controls regarding the storage, sale and issuing of ammunition. Monitoring the flows of ammunition would help states to identify sources of firearms and ammunition as well as trafficking patterns. This would enable the development of more effective approaches to controlling access to ammunition by criminal organizations.

- Crime-fighting agencies mandated to arrest and convict actors linked to illicit firearms markets such as gangs and organized criminal networks must allocate resources to enable them to focus not only on the main criminal activities of these groups, but also on the role they play in driving and resourcing the illicit firearm economy itself.
- Firearms are relatively robust and, if properly stored and maintained, can have a long life. So, even if governments take steps to limit the flow of new firearms into the illicit economy, this will need to be accompanied by measures to remove firearms already available in the illicit market. Therefore, understanding and tracking what is happening with firearms within different illicit markets will enable more effective penetration of these markets.

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