

Are Civilian Firearm Owners a Source of Guns for Criminals?

A DATA-DRIVEN INVESTIGATION USING SAPS DATA

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SOUTH AFRICAN GUN OWNERS ASSOCIATION | CAPE TOWN

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About the Author

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He has been involved in the South African firearm ownership and civil defence debate since 2013, and is the owner and editor of Paratus – an online firearm ownership publication.

1. Introduction

The relationship between civilian firearm ownership and violent crime in South Africa has become a focal point of public debate, driven by the country's escalating crime rates. Organised criminal groups exploit the existing security void left by state inadequacies, employing violence to dominate through massacres, kidnappings, and extortion.

Amid this crisis, calls to impose stricter restrictions or outright bans on civilian firearm ownership have gained traction, with proponents arguing that reducing access to guns will curtail their availability to criminals. This argument presumes that licensed gun owners are a significant source of firearms for criminal activities. Critics contend that if civilian firearm ownership were curtailed, criminals would be unable to procure guns from these sources.

However, this perspective often overlooks other significant contributors to the problem, such as state-level corruption, cross-border smuggling, and the sheer volume of illicit firearms already in circulation. This report seeks to explore whether the claim that firearms lost by lawful owners meaningfully supply criminal markets is supported by data. Furthermore, it examines how civilian firearm losses compare to those from state entities, providing a nuanced understanding of the issue.

The analysis draws on a decade of firearm loss and recovery data from South African Police Service (SAPS) Annual Reports, offering an evidence-based approach to address these claims and contribute to the broader discussion of firearm policy and crime prevention in South Africa.

2. Notes regarding the data

I extracted data pertaining to civilian and South African Police Service (SAPS) firearm losses and recoveries from SAPS Annual Reports spanning 10 years from the 2012/13 financial year to the 2022/23 financial year. The data is presented as tables and graphs in the relevant sections.

There are some issues with the data which require clarification:

- Up until at least 2016/17 state-owned firearm losses are grouped together with losses from individuals and non-state institutions: this will overestimate civilian losses and underestimate the recovery rate for the years in question.
- From 2019/20 onwards there are no records in the annual reports for state-owned firearm losses, only SAPS firearm losses.

None of these have a meaningful effect on the conclusions, but they require separate investigation and rectification.

3. South African firearm ownership and crime rates

Before continuing it is important to briefly provide a picture of the current situation and context pertaining to firearm ownership and crime rates in South Africa.

The [Global Small Arms Survey](#) estimates that [2.35-million illicitly-owned firearms currently circulate in South Africa](#). There have been several estimates of varying magnitude pertaining these numbers over the years, but the Global Small Arms Survey provides the highest quality (and least controversial) figure. In comparison, the total number of licensed firearms in the country stands at approximately 3 million.

This gives South Africa a firearms ownership rate of 9.7 civilian-possessed guns per 100 population. Which places us in 89th position globally: a lower ratio than Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Germany, France, and Uruguay. The data debunks the oft-made claim that South Africa suffers from a “[proliferation of firearms](#)”.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for our intentional homicide rate, where we find ourselves in second place: just under Jamaica. Our murder rate in 2023/24 was 45.6 murders per 100 000 population: the highest since 2000. It has also increased almost every year since 2010 (only briefly dipping in 2020) and is now 52% higher than when we hosted the FIFA World Cup.

It is necessary to briefly mention our extremely high murder rate. Intentional homicide rates are a good indicator of policing effectiveness in society. High and increasing murder rates infer ineffective and weak policing.

4. Civilian firearm owners under the microscope

In reaction to this worsening security situation, there is a somewhat disproportionate focus on civilian firearm ownership. Gun-owning members of the public are [accused of being a source of firearms for criminals](#). The narrative is that South African gun owners are deliberately targeted for their firearms at best and lose their guns due to irresponsible conduct and negligence at worst.

Certain groups and individuals use this accusation to demand increased restrictions and prohibitions on lawful firearm ownership. Their argument is that if we ban or severely restrict civilians from owning firearms, then criminals will no longer be able to use them as a source.

Firearm legislation in South Africa is presently highly restrictive. The process required to become a licensed firearm owner is costly and extensive. There exists a very real risk of severely diminishing returns in restricting lawful firearm ownership even further: lawful citizens will be arbitrarily deprived of their property and ability to defend themselves based on questionable assumptions regarding improvements in public safety, which contradict available data (as published in the Wits School of Governance report).

4.1. Negligent losses vs being a victim of crime

Whereas there are certainly cases of negligence in some firearm losses, they are very much in the minority (on average 10% of lost or stolen firearms are reported as lost). **It must be emphasised that not all losses are due to negligence.** There are significant penalties attached to being found guilty of negligence under the Firearms Control Act, and often guilty parties are declared unfit to possess firearms as a result. Hence a strong deterring mechanism for negligence already exists in legislation.

Regarding firearm losses resulting from robberies and theft: one must ask how ethical it is to blame civilians, whether private individuals or security firms, for being robbed of their firearms by criminals.

When considering the levels of crime and violence permeating throughout South African society, much of it as a direct result of state failure, there is certainly a very strong case for people lawfully arming themselves. Is it rational to blame them falling victim to the very criminals the state is failing to protect them from?

The idea that criminals deliberately target individual households to obtain firearms was already challenged by Mark Shaw in *Give us More Guns* – “**...the gang had long identified the state as the easiest way of sourcing weapons in bulk rather than one by one in suburban burglaries**”.

4.2. State losses and corruption

Firearms deliberately sold to criminals by corrupt agents of the state present a problem of which the magnitude has not been adequately quantified. In the most infamous case, that of SAPS Colonel Chris Prinsloo, there is still no accurate estimate of the number of guns sold by corrupt police officers to gangs. It is generally accepted to be thousands.

There have been additional cases of corrupt police officers selling guns to criminals out of state stocks, hence we must note that Chris Prinsloo only represents the most high-profile case thus far.

To further exacerbate matters, the same weaknesses exploited by Prinsloo (and other corrupt police officials) to steal guns from SAP 13 evidence stores and sell them to criminals have not been rectified: SAP 13 evidence stores are still not monitored for guns lost or stolen from their stocks, and no data or audited reports of their contents exist.

It is also well reported that criminal groups (specifically taxi mafias, but not limited to them) are exploiting corruption within the Central Firearms Registry and SAPS to fraudulently obtain firearm licenses.

Clearly the matter is much more complex than simply blaming legally armed civilians for criminals obtaining access to firearms. To answer the question of how much civilian firearm losses feed into existing criminal stocks, a data-driven investigation is necessary.

5. How many guns do civilians lose?

The data extracted from the SAPS Annual Reports are presented in the table below.

The total number of firearms reported as stolen or lost from civilian institutions and individuals per financial year is in the second column and appropriately labelled. Alongside the reported losses, the number of firearms recovered by police in the same year, and the number of firearms left in illicit circulation (the difference between firearms stolen/lost and recovered) are presented in their own labelled columns.

A civilian firearm owner can be defined as follows: the term includes private individuals (natural persons), as well as juristic persons such as private security firms, firearm training institutions, game farming and conservation entities, and any other institution that has firearms licensed to itself under Section 20 of the Firearms Control Act.

Firearms Stolen/Lost from Private Individuals and Institutions

Year	Reported Stolen/Lost	Recovered	Left in circulation	% Recovered
2013/14	7589	10113	-2524	133,26
2014/15	7305	5341	1964	73,11
2015/16	7289	8465	-1176	116,13
2016/17	9853	17260	-7407	175,18
2017/18	9336	18950	-9614	202,98
2018/19	9609	7503	2106	78,08
2019/20	8007	4663	3344	58,24
2020/21	5278	2035	3243	38,56
2021/22	2913	3210	-297	110,20
2022/23	8241	4616	3625	56,01
TOTALS	75420	82156	-6736	NA
AVG.	7542	8216	-674	104,17

Between 2013 and 2023 a total of 75 420 firearms were reported as lost or stolen from individuals and institutions. This gives an average of 7542 firearms per year. It is suggested that this figure is accurate due to the significant penalties for failing or neglecting to report such a loss or theft.

According to Chapter 16 Section 120 (11) of the [Firearms Control Act](#), it is an offence not to report a lost or stolen firearm to the SAPS within 24 hours of discovering such a loss. The maximum penalty for this offence is 10 years in prison (Schedule 4 of the Act). Therefore, there is a significant incentive to report the loss to the police as soon as possible, since it is likely to be detected by the authorities in due course anyway.

5.1. Firearms recovered exceed those stolen and lost annually

During the same ten-year period the SAPS recovered a total of 82 156 firearms, averaging 8216 firearms recovered per year. The police recovered **6736 more firearms** between 2013 and 2023 **than were reported as lost or stolen**.

Therefore, **criminally held stocks of firearms shrank by 6736 guns** between 2013/14 and 2022/23, with the SAPS achieving an average annual recovery rate of over 104%.

In five out of the ten financial years the police recovered more firearms than were reported as lost or stolen, with **the highest recovery rate being 203%** in 2017/18 (see additional clarification in Appendix A), **and the lowest 38% in 2020/21**.

There are several reasons why firearm recoveries exceed the number reported as lost and stolen each year:

- Police recover firearms reported as lost or stolen in previous years.
- Firearms sold from state custody to criminals by corrupt state officials are recovered.
- Police seizure of firearms smuggled across the border.
- Recovery of firearms lost or stolen from other state institutions which were never reported (more on this in the next section).

Firearm recoveries are largely a product of intelligence driven police operations, but also of day-to-day policing activities. Raids resulting from actionable crime intelligence have led to the discovery and seizure of major criminal arms caches.

Equally police interventions in armed robberies, cash-in-transit heists, gang activity, illegal mining, and other violent crimes regularly result in firearms being taken off the streets.

It is important to note that **strong policing is necessary for both the recovery of criminally held firearms and the reduction of violent crime levels**.

This finding was emphasised by the Wits School of Governance in their 2015 report, [*Analysis of the Effect of the Firearms Control Act on Crime 2000 to 2014*](#):

“...strong policing must be maintained to achieve sustained decline in crime. In spite of the FCA, in the absence of strong policing, the usage of firearms in perpetrating murder (although not used in the majority of murders) tends to return to the higher levels.”

“...Authorities need to shift their misplaced, unconditional faith in the ability of the FCA to solve crime to policing; the FCA is not effective unless it functions under strong policing.”

5.2. Removed serial numbers

A significant proportion of firearms recovered annually (on average more than 50%) had their serial numbers removed. This makes tracing the original owners and details pertaining the circumstances of the firearm's loss difficult. Criminals sanitise firearms of their serial numbers and other identifying markings engraved in their barrels, frames, receivers, and slides to hide the origin of the stolen gun.

Corrupt police officials will in cases remove these markings from firearms stolen out of SAP 13 evidence stores before selling them to criminals so that the guns cannot be traced back to them. Criminals will also sanitise stolen guns to prevent them from being connected to other crime scenes.

The implication is that **we do not know for certain what number of firearms stolen from civilians are recovered in the same calendar year**, and that the official number is going to be understated.

It also makes it difficult to identify how many firearms stolen from SAP 13 evidence stores and sold to criminal groups are recovered. Similarly, unless a recovered firearm is of a make and model that is likely to have been smuggled across the border, the removal of serial numbers makes it difficult to determine if the firearm originated locally or from elsewhere.

5.3. Implications

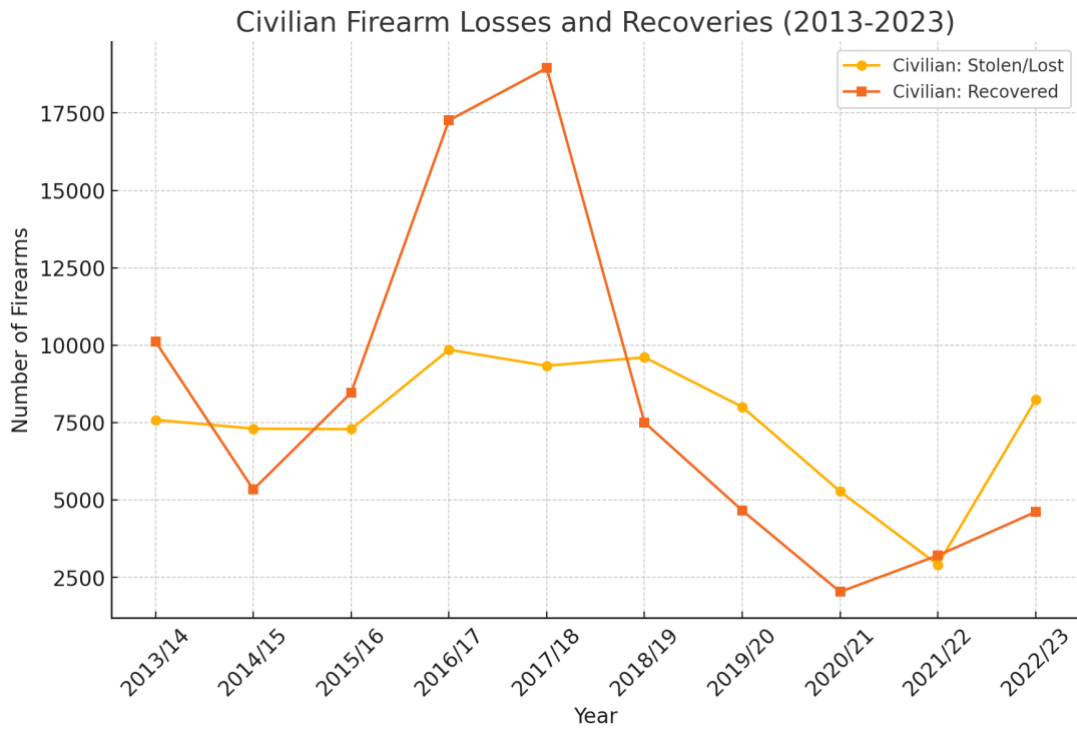
An estimated 7500 firearms are reported as lost and stolen from civilian individuals and institutions annually. The police recover an average of 8200 firearms every year. This shrinks the stock of illicitly held firearms by approximately 700 guns annually. **The SAPS have removed 6736 more firearms out of criminal hands than were stolen or lost by civilians during the period 2013/14 to 2022/23.**

If we entirely ignore firearm recoveries, the **7500 civilian guns lost or stolen annually represent only 0.3% of the total illicit firearm stock of 2.35-million guns.**

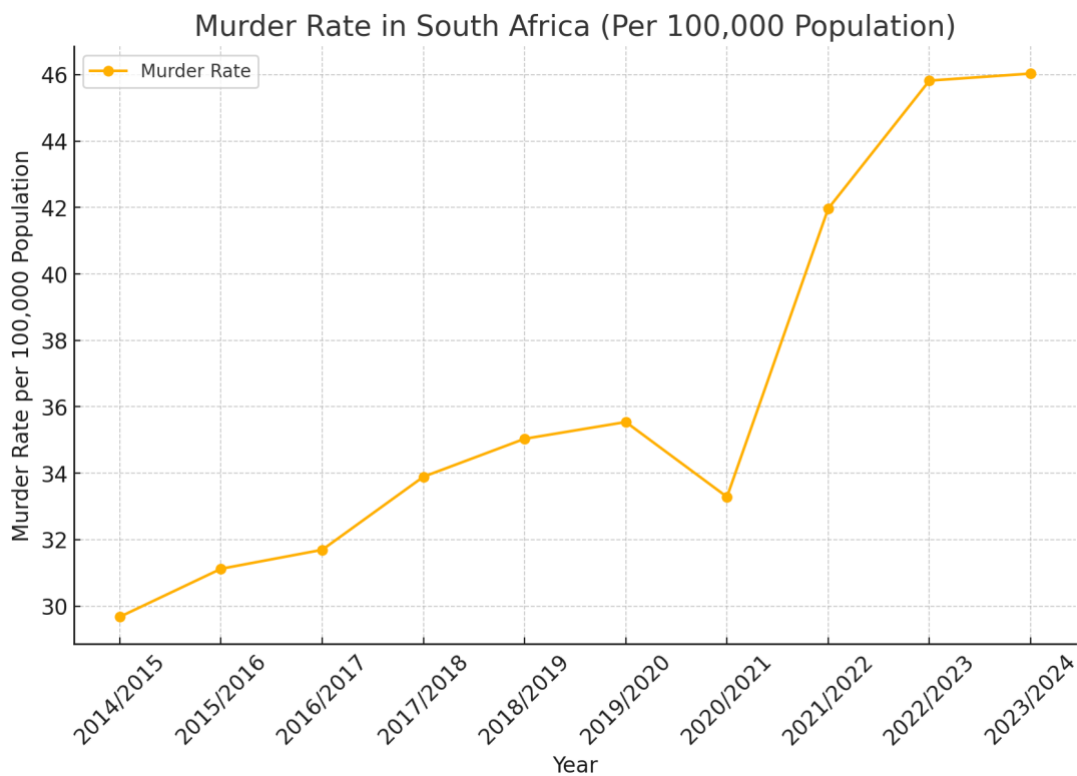
Therefore, **it does not appear that firearms lost or stolen from civilian sources are feeding the illicit market with any real significance.**

What is concerning is the decline in both the rate and absolute number of firearms the SAPS recover annually. In the first five years (from 2013/14 to 2017/18) the police recovered 60 129 firearms versus 41 372 reported as lost or stolen. This significantly declined (by 63%) in the last five years (from 2018/19 to 2022/23) where the SAPS recovered 22 027 firearms versus 34 048 reported as lost or stolen.

When graphically represented it becomes clear that reported civilian losses have remained relatively stable, and even declined, while firearms recovered by the police have significantly declined between 2013/14 and 2022/23.



This indicates serious problems affecting the functioning of crime intelligence, as well as the strength and effectiveness of policing. **When compared with trends in murder rate over the same period, it supports the assertion that the police service finds itself in a significant state of crisis.**



There are [numerous reasons for the decline in crime intelligence effectiveness and the weakening of policing](#): resource and budget constraints, leadership failures at SAPS management level, political interference, policing strategy failures, and the infiltration of corruption and criminality within the organisation all have a significant impact. Analysing them in detail goes beyond the scope of this report.

6. Firearm losses from the state

Quantifying state firearm losses is significantly more difficult than keeping track of civilian losses. Officially reported SAPS firearm losses are presented in the table below in the same format as the civilian losses in the previous section.

Official SAPS Firearms

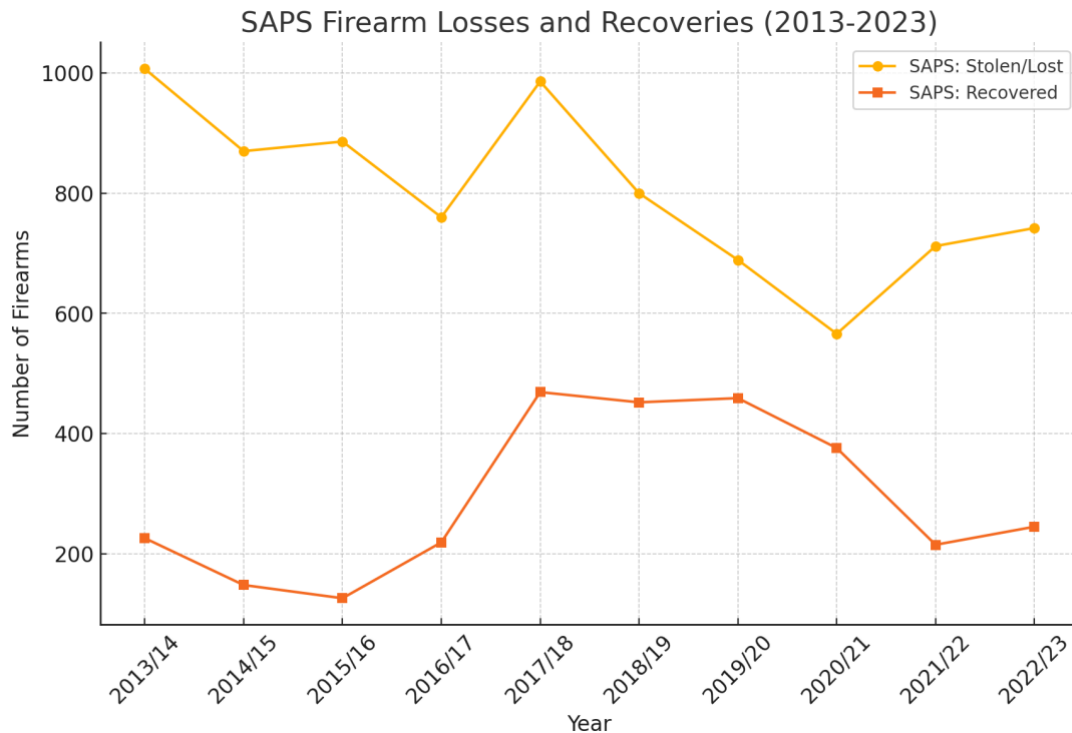
Year	Reported Stolen/Lost	Recovered	Left in circulation	% Recovered
2013/14	1007	226	781	22,44
2014/15	870	148	722	17,01
2015/16	886	126	760	14,22
2016/17	760	219	541	28,82
2017/18	986	469	517	47,57
2018/19	800	452	348	56,50
2019/20	689	459	230	66,62
2020/21	566	376	190	66,43
2021/22	712	215	497	30,20
2022/23	742	245	497	33,02
TOTALS	8018	2935	5083	NA
AVG.	802	294	508	38,28

In the ten-year period from 2013/14 to 2022/23 the SAPS recorded a total of 8018 police firearms reported as lost or stolen, averaging 802 reported losses per year. During the same period the police recovered 2935 SAPS firearms circulated as lost or stolen, meaning that 5083 remain unaccounted for.

The average recovery rate for firearms lost or stolen from civilian sources is 104%, with the latest recovery rate (2022/23) being 56%. Recovery rates for SAPS firearms contrast sharply with civilian recovery rates, with an average of only 38% of lost or stolen SAPS firearms recovered between 2013/14 and 2022/23. There has been a notable improvement in SAPS recovery rates from 2017/18 onwards, but it has again declined by more than 50% in the last two years.

In absolute numbers, while the police recovered 6700 more firearms than were reported as stolen or lost from civilians during the ten-year period, it **recovered 5083 fewer SAPS firearms than were reported as stolen or lost.**

Therefore, the under recovery of SAPS firearms nearly cancels out the surplus of recovered civilian firearms.



A possible contributor to the low recovery rates of official police firearms is the large proportion (on average more than 50%) of recovered firearms that had their serial numbers removed. As previously mentioned, this makes tracing the origins of the firearm difficult.

It is possible to determine if a recovered firearm originates from the police or SANDF by its type, make, and model, and the presence of dot peen markings (whether intact or removed). To what extent the police use this methodology is unclear.

Of greater concern is the state's overall firearm custodianship.

The 502 state entities in South Africa own a total of 2.2 million guns. Other government departments own more firearms [than the SAPS and SANDF combined](#).

Jenni Irish-Qhobosheane, a researcher at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, submitted PAIA application a few years ago to all government institutions querying the number of firearms in their stores. Only one, the Department of Justice, responded. According to Ms. Irish-Qhobosheane, "(this) either means they don't take this issue seriously or they (are) not capable of actually saying how many firearms they are losing".

State institutions are estimated to [lose approximately 1800 firearms per year](#), with the majority of these losses going unreported. This raises the question whether or not the majority of these are true losses, or if the firearms are simply handed over to criminals.

Muddying the waters even further, there is a lack of clarity regarding how reported state-owned firearm losses are categorised, including losses from metro police and traffic police. Are they included among civilian firearm losses as tabled in SAPS annual reports? Do they have a separate reporting category? How are their recoveries categorised?

Without clear answers to these questions, it is possible that firearm losses from other state institutions (non-SAPS and non-SANDF) could inflate civilian firearm loss figures.

It is also unclear what consequences and repercussions apply to those responsible for managing state-owned firearms (including the SAPS and SANDF) when firearms are lost, or when record keeping of arsenals is in a poor and negligent state.

Civilians face severe sanction if they are found guilty of negligence pertaining the safekeeping of their firearms and failure to report a firearm theft or loss. Similar accountability likely applies to state employees, but it appears to not be enforced judging from the poor record keeping and loss reporting.

7. Conclusions

Civilian individuals and institutions reported an average of 7500 firearms as lost or stolen annually between 2013 and 2023. The majority (more than 90%) of these losses are directly attributable to criminal activity, where the firearm is robbed or stolen from the victim. State failure and the significant decline of policing after 2010 directly contributed to a security environment where citizens face increasing levels of confrontational crime.

These firearm losses cannot simply be blamed on civilians for owning firearms in a country where there is a genuine need for self-protection against violence. Equally so, where private security officers are robbed of their firearms during the performance of their duties in a high-risk environment, such a loss cannot be deemed negligent.

That the police successfully recovered 6700 more firearms than were reported as lost or stolen from civilian sources over the same period is an exceptional achievement. Guns stolen from civilians do not appear to add to criminal stocks beyond the short term: lost and stolen firearms are either recovered swiftly or offset by other recoveries and seizures.

Even when recovery rates are excluded, the 7,500 civilian firearms lost annually represent just 0.3% of South Africa's estimated 2.35 million illicit firearms – a negligible contribution to the broader issue.

Another interesting point to note is that although there was a sharp increase in the intentional homicide rate between 2013 and 2023, civilian firearm losses remained stable and even declined somewhat.

Therefore, the data does not support the claim that civilian firearm owners are a meaningful source of guns for criminals.

Unfortunately, this does not extend to firearms owned by the state itself.

Recovery rates of official SAPS firearms are significantly lower than those of private individuals and institutions. State entities which own firearms appear to exercise abysmal custodianship, which can more accurately be described as criminally negligent.

Equally so is the lack of clarity regarding what sanction agents of the state face when firearms are lost due to negligence or criminality, as well as for poor and negligent record keeping and reporting activities.

There is also uncertainty regarding how firearm losses from other state (non-SAPS and non-SANDF) are recorded. If they are grouped together with civilian losses it will result in these figures being unrealistically inflated. A parliamentary question or PAIA application may be necessary to obtain the required answers to this conundrum.

The sharp decline in firearm recoveries, both in absolute number and in rate, by the SAPS from 2018 onwards indicate a serious problems within the organisation. **Strong policing actions and intelligence driven operations targeting organised criminal groups are necessary for reducing crime and violence in South Africa.** Where these are absent or lacking there is an observable increase in violent crime rates, as well as a decrease in firearm recoveries.

The recommended focus should therefore be on restoring policing to the required levels and not be distracted by legislative amendments to the Firearms Control Act, which is not the correct vehicle for addressing the problem of violent crime. Stronger policing will primarily result in enhanced public safety and reduced criminality, but also in improved enforcement of the Act.

8. Recommendations

1. **Urgently restore crime intelligence from dysfunction.** It is a vital component of intelligence-driven police operations targeting organised criminal groups engaging in violent crime, including the illicit firearm market.
2. **Ensure strong and effective policing and criminal prosecution.** The most effective method to bring overall levels of violent crime down and remove criminally held guns from the streets is strong policing and prosecution.
3. **Target corruption and criminality within the SAPS and CFR.** Corruption and criminality within the service and CFR must be rooted out and eliminated.
4. **Audit and place effective controls on SAP 13 Evidence Stores.** The lack of transparency and accountability regarding the contents and custodianship of SAP 13 evidence lockers are a serious concern, and this must be rectified.
5. **Implement transparent, effective and audited record keeping of state firearms.** There are 502 state entities owning approximately 2.2-million firearms. Abysmal record keeping has resulted in most of these entities being unable to account for their firearm stocks, which indicates a lack of accountability, negligence, and possible corruption.

9. Sources

South African Police Service (SAPS) Annual Reports for the financial year:

- [2013/14](#)
- [2014/15](#)
- [2015/16](#)
- [2016/17](#)
- [2017/18](#)
- [2018/19](#)
- [2019/20](#)
- [2020/21](#)
- [2021/22](#)
- [2022/23](#)

Appendix A – Police Recovery of Lost and Stolen Firearms

Here are specific examples and details from the SAPS 2017/2018 Annual Report that highlight how the police succeeded in recovering a significant number of firearms:

1. Focused Operations and Campaigns

- SAPS conducted **59,092 liquor operations**, which included firearm confiscation as part of efforts to tackle crime hotspots where illegal firearms were often used or traded. These operations also led to the closure of **19,965 unlicensed liquor premises**, reducing environments conducive to firearm-related crimes.
- Targeted crime prevention efforts resulted in **15,585 national crime prevention operations**. These included searches, roadblocks, and raids, all contributing to firearm recoveries.

2. Improved Detection and Intelligence

- The **Crime Intelligence Division** generated **42,793 threat and risk assessment reports** and **118,642 profiles for reactive policing operations**. These detailed insights helped law enforcement target high-risk individuals and syndicates involved in firearms trafficking.
- Intelligence-led operations were critical in dismantling criminal syndicates, leading to the recovery of firearms used in organized crimes like cash-in-transit (CIT) heists.

3. Community Engagement

- SAPS hosted **88 community outreach campaigns**, promoting cooperation with the public to report illegal firearms. Community members were critical in providing information that led to the recovery of illegal firearms from individuals and syndicates.

4. Destruction of Recovered Firearms

- SAPS destroyed all confiscated firearms to prevent their return to criminal circulation. In 2017/2018, **18,592 firearms** were recovered, including those owned by individuals, dealers, and institutions. This number includes **14,627 firearms recovered, confiscated, or forfeited**.

5. Stringent Inspections and Control

- The **Firearm, Liquor, and Second-Hand Goods (FLASH)** division conducted inspections that uncovered compliance issues among licensed firearm holders. These inspections contributed to the identification and confiscation of firearms obtained or used illegally.

6. Strategic Focus on Violent Crimes

- As part of SAPS's strategy to combat violent crimes, they focused on reducing **trio crimes (house robberies, business robberies, and carjackings)**. This led to several firearms used in these crimes being seized during arrests and follow-up investigations.
- A National Trio Crimes Task Team was formed to address these crimes, significantly contributing to firearm recoveries through coordinated operations in the 20 most affected clusters.

7. Specialized Units

- The **Tactical Response Teams (TRTs)** and **Tracking Teams** played a pivotal role in high-risk operations targeting dangerous criminals. These units were specifically trained and resourced to confiscate illegal firearms during confrontations and arrests.
- The **National Intervention Units (NIU)** responded to **2,407 incidents**, many of which involved the confiscation of firearms.

8. Border Control Operations

- Enhanced border patrols and vehicle checkpoints (VCPs) played a critical role in intercepting firearms being trafficked across South Africa's borders. In total, **44,401 vehicle patrols, 2,018 VCPs, and 60,295 foot patrols** were conducted during the year.
- These operations prevented firearms from entering or leaving the country illegally and disrupted smuggling networks.

9. Collaboration with Private and International Partners

- SAPS partnered with the **South African Banking Risk Information Centre (SABRIC)** and private security providers to address cash-in-transit heists, often involving firearms. Coordinated efforts with these partners resulted in targeted arrests and firearm recoveries.
- International cooperation with INTERPOL and neighbouring countries facilitated operations that tackled cross-border firearm trafficking.

These examples demonstrate the SAPS's comprehensive approach to recovering illegal firearms, addressing the issue from multiple angles with targeted operations, intelligence, and community collaboration.