

Chapter 2

Illegal Firearms in Circulation in South Africa

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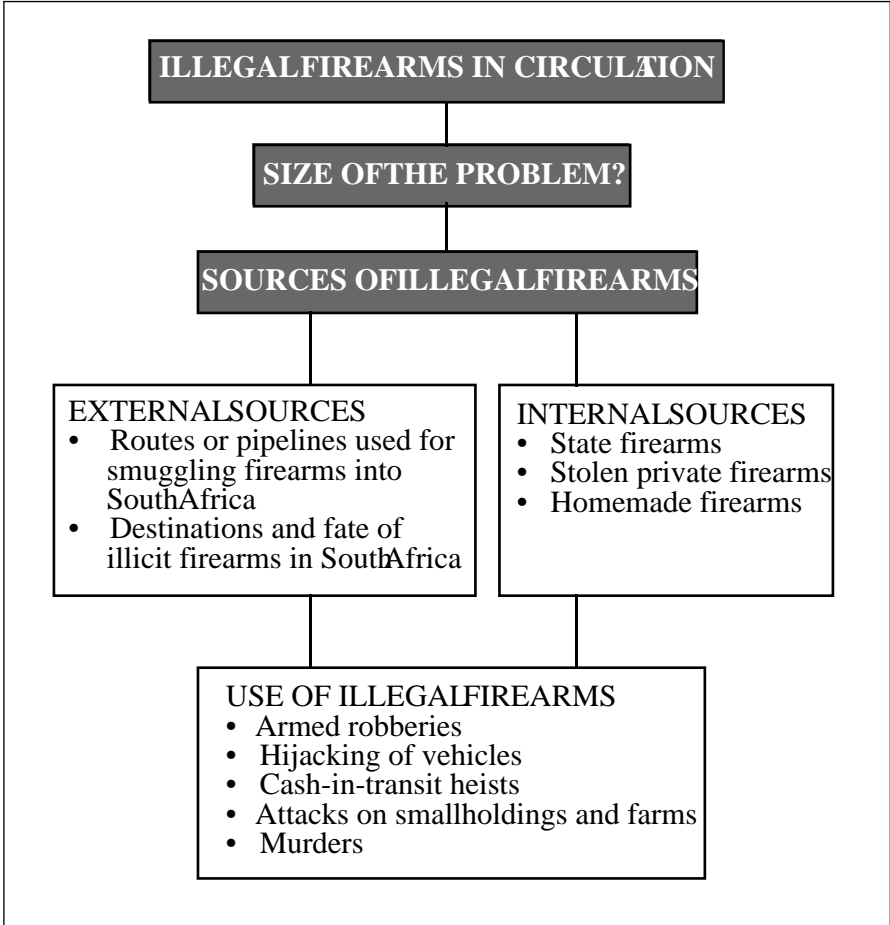
Introduction

South Africa is bogged down by unacceptably high numbers of weapons in circulation, smuggled into the country from neighbours in the subregion, stolen from legal firearm owners and state institutions, or left over from the ‘total onslaught’ campaign of the 1980s and the liberation movement’s struggle for freedom. Increasingly, the country is being subjected to violent forms of conflict resolution, particularly on an individual level, resulting in high levels of firearm-related crimes.

This chapter aims to provide an overview, not only of the extent of the problem of illegal firearms in circulation, but also of the various sources of firearms – both internally and externally. The following report is structured according to the outline below.

Number of Illegal Weapons in South Africa

Illegal weapons pose a particular threat to South Africa’s fledgling democracy, as no one really knows the exact number of illegal firearms in circulation in the country. One method available for determining the number of illegal firearms in circulation is to make an estimate from available statistics on firearms lost by and stolen from legal owners, state armouries, government departments and government personnel. However, as a result of, among others, the low level of reporting of thefts and losses of firearms, the figure falls short of reality. Moreover, it does not take into account the crossborder smuggling of firearms and the remains of arms caches built-up by both liberation movements and covert government operations during the liberation struggle. An additional indicator of the number of illegal firearms in circulation is the figure for the recovery or seizure of firearms by law enforcement agencies.



The extent to which statistics on the flows of illicit firearms fall short of the real situation is debatable. If, conservatively estimated, there is one illegal firearm for every legal firearm (4.3 million) in South Africa, the extent of the problem is grave. The increase in violent crimes and the ease with which criminals appear to have access to firearms are indicative of the seriousness of the situation.

The Department for Safety and Security, on the basis of available evidence, feels that the pool of illegal firearms is not greater than 500 000 firearms. This figure is calculated as indicated in table 1.

**Table 1 – Illegal firearms in circulation as estimated by the
Department of Safety and Security**

TOTAL	SUBTOTAL	DESCRIPTION
200 000		Total state-owned firearms missing
	18 000	Left behind by the SADF after its withdrawal from Namibia (former South West Africa)
	63 000	Issued to commando and reservist members after completion of national service, these firearms were not retrieved from members because they moved, or changed addresses without notifying the SADF/SANDF
	91 000	Sent to other countries as part of special projects or, as it was referred to during a TRC hearing, “reconciliation sale/transfers of arms”
	22 000	Firearms lost or stolen over a period of time, including those lost or stolen from the ten former homeland police forces
	6 000	Firearms provided to local black councillors, local black professional people in townships and to tribal leaders.
150 000		Firearms stolen from private owners
20-30 000		Homemade firearms
Unknown		Number of illegal imports
Unknown		Number of underreported losses from all sectors in South Africa
500 000		TOTAL NUMBER OF ILLEGAL FIREARMS

Source: Joint Investigation Team

In order to understand the change in the number of illegal weapons in South Africa, a number of indicators have to be monitored. As a result of the ‘illegal nature’ of these weapons, their numbers are often tracked by looking at a range of statistics that provide a window into the illegal market. These indicators include: the number of reported cases of violent crimes; the number of reported cases of firearm-related crimes; the number of reported cases of robbery with aggravating circumstances; the number of losses and

thefts of firearms; the number of firearms retrieved; the seizure of ammunition; and finally, the number of licence applications received and approved.

From these indicators, the numbers of firearms moving from legal possession to illegal are measured. These include weapons stolen or lost from either private or state ownership. The number of firearms lost or stolen from private possession is often underreported, as a result of a penalty being attached to the negligent loss of a weapon. However, the necessary reporting of criminal incidence to obtain a docket number, as required by insurance companies prior to insurance remuneration, could offset this.

In addition to this, although difficult to measure statistically, it is likely that illegal firearms are utilised for criminal activities such as robbery. A person committing a criminal offence would be more likely to use an illegal weapon, as this would prevent the police from linking him/her – as the possible firearm owner – to the crime. Thus, taking cognisance of the incidence of robbery could also provide an indicator of the number of illegal firearms in circulation. This figure, however, could be inflated as a result of criminals making internal weapon exchanges and utilising the same weapon for multiple crimes.

The indicator provided by murder statistics may also be marginally inflated, as the weapons utilised for murder, more so than in robbery, could be legal, and this more so with regard to domestic accidents, suicides and accidental deaths than premeditated murder. In South Africa, statistics on the relationship between the perpetrator and the firearm used in a murder are sketchy to say the least. With this in mind, the ISS undertook docket analysis, the findings of which are to be released in 2000.

Sources of Illegal Firearms in South Africa

Illicit firearms in South Africa are available from different sources that change over time. Broadly speaking, the types of sources are categorised as internal and external. The sources internal to South Africa would include private firearm holders and state-owned weapons, while external sources are weapons obtained from across South African national borders. The ratio

between illegal weapons from internal and external sources shifts with availability and market demand. It is widely accepted that the high demand for weapons in Central Africa is moving this ratio towards internal weapons sources.

Prior to the first democratic elections in 1994 in South Africa, the main source of illicit firearms in the country derived from outside (that is, sources from across the national borders). These firearms were mainly destined for political and liberation movements. After the elections, the smuggling routes, established and maintained through the demand generated by the socio-political climate in South Africa, were used increasingly by criminals who were familiar with the contacts for firearms outside the country, as well as the old routes used during the liberation struggle. Many of these arms caches created by the liberation movements are still unaccounted for and are finding their way into the pool of illegal firearms in South Africa.

As Mozambique witnessed the end of its civil war and Angola experienced short periods of cease-fire, the demand for small arms waned in the southern region of Africa. With the demand for small arms decreasing within the broader Southern African context, and South Africa and Mozambique enjoying their new democracies in the early 1990s, there was a huge release of small arms onto the black market. In a relatively short period, these weapons, released from active civil war conflicts from across South African borders, appeared to flood the South African market. The increases in armed robbers, car-hijackers, cash-in-transit robbers and murderers using firearms are witness to this fact.

In the last few years, the availability of firearms from foreign sources seems to be on the decline. This is attributed to positive firearm recovery programmes, such as Operations Rachel – joint operations between the governments of South Africa and Mozambique in which large numbers of arms caches were destroyed. The revival of the civil wars in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo is also currently depleting the available stocks of illegal firearms on the continent. As a result, obtaining illegal firearms from outside South African borders has become more difficult and criminals have started looking for sources of firearms within South Africa. Should long-awaited peace come to these two areas of conflict, however, large numbers of firearms could find their way back to South Africa. Even

the South African Police Service's Illegal Firearm Investigation Units (FIUs) dread this event. If, during any peace process, the right measures are not taken – such as the destruction of firearms to prevent arms from finding their way to the next conflict or illegal market – these surplus firearms soon become responsible for further conflicts and misery in the region.

The sources of firearms within South Africa are currently fuelling the illicit market in South Africa. These sources include firearms in state armouries, those in possession of law enforcement agencies and private security officers. Of particular concern are thefts from South African National Defence Force (SANDF) armouries, on account of the high level of sophistication of these military armaments. The theft of firearms from members of the security services, such as the SAPS and SANDF, constitutes another source of illicit firearms. Currently, this does not comprise a significant source of firearms to the illicit market, but the recent trend of attacks on police and police stations and the theft of firearms could be a taste of things to come. The firearms stolen from this source include pistols, shotguns and assault rifles. In the Western Cape, the increase in gang violence is fuelled by assault rifles stolen from the police in the province, and certain gang-related shootings are executed with weapons from the same source.

The most significant source of firearms for the illicit market in South Africa is those stolen from legal firearm owners (licit weapons in this case become illicit). As a background to firearm-related crime, table 2 below outlines the total number of violent crimes reported in South Africa between 1994 and 1998.

Criminals are well aware of the growing number of South Africans who are buying firearms because they feel unsafe as a result of the increase in violent crimes. This is evident in crimes involving firearms, like robbery, that increased from 75.8% in 1996 to 78.7% in 1998, and murder with a firearm that increased from 41.5% in 1994 to 49.3% in 1998. (See table 3 below for the crimes accounted for under robbery with aggravating circumstances between 1994 and 1998.)

From 1994 to 1998, there has been an increase in the number of approved firearm licences for private firearm owners and, over the same period, an

Table 2 – Total reported cases of violent crimes between 1994 and 1998

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Murder	26 832	26 637	25 782	24 588	24 875
Attempted murder	27 300	26 512	28 516	28 148	29 418
Robbery with aggravating circumstances	84 900	80 071	67 249	69 691	88 319
Rape	42 429	47 506	50 481	52 159	49 280
Assault – GBH (serious)	210 250	220 990	230 425	234 554	234 056
Common assault	193 764	205 101	205 333	201 863	199 313
Other robbery	32 423	40 881	51 506	52 678	62 111
TOTAL	619 892	649 693	661 288	665 678	689 370

Source: Crime Information Analysis Centre, South African Police Service

Table 3 – Crimes accounted for under robbery with aggravating circumstances between 1995 and 1998

	1995	1996	1997	1998
Carjacking	6 683	12 860	13 011	15 111
Hijacking of trucks	1 695	3 694	4 296	5 773
Robbery of cash-in-transit	123	410	120	214
Bank robberies	646	642	497	476

Source: Crime Information Analysis Centre

increase in the theft and negligent loss of firearms from private owners. In 1994, the number of firearms reported stolen was 7 285, while in 1998, it was 11 391, indicating an increase of 56.4%. The number of firearms reported as being negligently lost in 1996 was 4 729 and in 1998, it was

6 231. (See table 4 below for the total number of reported cases of firearm-related crimes between 1994 and 1998.)

Table 4 – Number of reported cases of firearm-related crime between 1994 and 1998

CRIME	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Murder with firearm	11 134	11 056	11 394	11 215	12 267
Attempted murder with firearm	23 682	22 035	22 387	20 937	22 001
Robbery with firearm	-	-	51 005	54 250	69 501
Attempted robbery with firearm	-	-	2 014	4 237	4 703
Theft of firearm	7 285	7 456	9 085	12 141	11 391
Negligent loss of firearm	-	-	4 729	4 964	6 231
Illegal possession of firearm/ammunition	-	-	13 413	13 036	14 554
Negligent handling of firearm	-	-	2 895	3 362	3 384
Firing of firearm in municipal area	-	-	2 791	2 983	3 098
Pointing of firearm	-	-	22 742	23 655	25 375
Other transgressions of the <i>Arms and Ammunition Act</i> (no 75 of 1969)	-	-	1 333	765	909

Source: South African Police Service

The increase in the theft and negligent loss of firearms from private owners is higher than the official number reported. There is underreporting of these crimes, since firearm owners fear that they could be declared unfit to possess a firearm if it were proven that the loss of the firearm was through negligence on their behalf. South African data shows an increase between 1994 and 1998, from 14 460 firearms to 20 682 firearms, respectively, in the

number of illegal firearms recovered by the illegal firearm units. (See table 5 below for the number of firearms retrieved between 1996 and 1998.)

The total number of ammunition seized by the illegal firearm units is also a useful indicator of the increase in the number of firearms. (See table 6 below for the total seizure of ammunition by the SAPS between 1994 and 1998.)

Other lesser sources of firearms for the illicit market in South Africa include the illegal imports of firearms, and those remaining after international hunting expeditions. There are no statistics available on the extent of these sources.

Table 5 – Firearms retrieved in South Africa between 1994 and 1998					
TYPE	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Rifles (excluding AK-47s)	1 988	2 144	2 075	1 877	2 306
AK-47s	1 589	1 392	1 169	803	527
Pistols	5 396	7 200	9 292	7 064	11 501
Revolvers	2 364	2 842	2 812	2 272	3 282
Homemade weapons	3 123	2 713	2 806	2 954	3 066
TOTAL	14 460	16 291	18 154	14 970	20 682
Source: South African Police Service					

Table 6 – Ammunition seized by the SAPS between 1994 and 1998					
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
7,62 (all types)	103 424	40 717	48 299	29 723	30 513
Other	203 367	108 259	105 439	110 355	352 458
Source: South African Police Service					

External Sources of Illegal Weapons in South Africa

As previously mentioned, the external sources of illegal weapons are those originating from outside South Africa. These weapons, some of them destined for South Africa and others in transit through the country, move in along a number of routes or pipelines. Weapons-smuggling is a highly organised activity, making use of well-established routes utilised by people also smuggling other illegal goods.

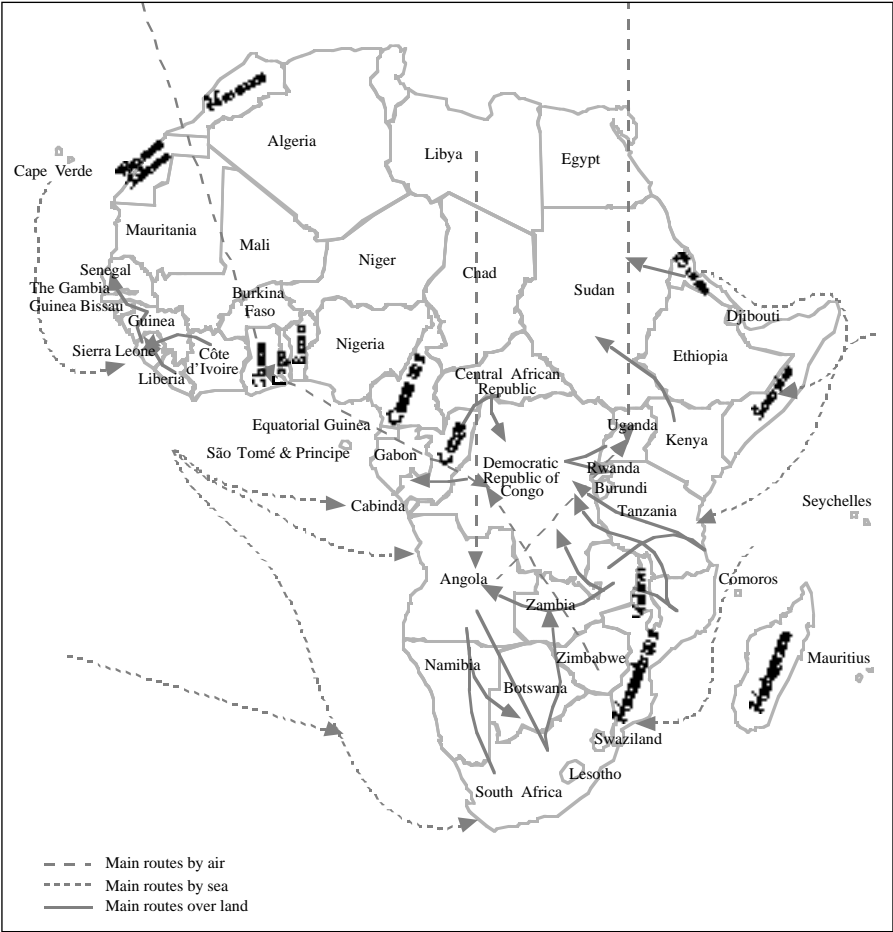
Routes Used for Smuggling Firearms into South Africa

Many of the routes followed by criminals to smuggle firearms into South Africa are those that were used during the liberation struggles within the region. Those who were involved in the struggles and those supplying and transporting small arms are familiar with these routes. When democracy was instituted in these countries, including South Africa, criminals simply started using these routes for their own purposes.

On a national level, firearms were smuggled from Mozambique into KwaZulu-Natal by warlords in their struggle to gain political power in the province. Firearms also found their way into Gauteng from Mozambique through Mpumalanga and the Northern Province. This fuelled the crime wave in Gauteng, arming political factions in the province. Many of these firearms were also used in faction fighting in other provinces, most notably in the Northern Province and the Eastern Cape.

Another route frequently used by smugglers runs from Namibia via Cape Town en route to Gauteng. This route is mainly operated by women from Gauteng, who barter second-hand clothes and ceramic ornaments in towns on the border between Angola and Namibia. These women exchange the clothes for firearms and work their way back to Gauteng via Cape Town, hitching rides in freight or long-distance trucks. Yet another route runs from Angola and Zambia through Botswana on the new Trans-Kalahari highway into South Africa. The arms infiltrated in this way find their way to Gauteng, the North-West and the southern parts of the Free State. A new route for and source of firearms into South Africa was created after the intervention of South African Development Community (SADC) forces in Lesotho. During this intervention, large numbers of firearms were stolen from Lesotho army bases and hidden in the mountains.

The major routes or pipelines of small arms flows within Africa are highlighted on the map below.



The Destination and Fate of Illicit Firearms in South Africa

At present, criminals and syndicates within the country use most of the firearms stolen or smuggled into South Africa. Firearms also flow through South Africa to regions of conflict. The flow of firearms from Mozambique to the Great Lakes Region, for example, fuels the civil wars there.

In the South African context, most of these firearms end up in the hands of criminals. As mentioned previously, there is an increase in crimes involving firearms. Vehicle hijackings increased from 6 683 in 1995 to 15 111 in 1998, an increase of 12.6%. But the shock is the 24.1% increase in truck hijacking over the same period: in 1995, there were 1 695 reported cases and, in 1998, 5 773. Firearms were used in the majority of these hijackings, and handguns are the most frequently used firearms in vehicle hijackings. (See table 3 with details about the crimes accounted for under robbery with aggravating circumstances between 1994 and 1998.)

There has also been an increase in robberies with firearms in the last few years. These include cash-in-transit robberies and bank robberies. Statistics indicate an increase from 51 005 robberies with a firearm in 1996, to 69 501 in 1998, excluding attempted robberies. Again, the firearms favoured for robbery are handguns, except in the case of cash-in-transit robbery, where assault rifles are the weapon type preferred by criminals.

The incidence of the negligent use of a firearm is also showing an upward trend. This is evident in the increase in the number of incidents of the negligent handling of a firearm, the firing of a firearm in a municipal area and the pointing of a firearm.

Figures for attacks on farms and smallholdings also showed an increase from 1997 to 1998. In 1997, 66.1% of all the attacks on farms and smallholdings were committed with firearms, with a handgun again most frequently used by criminals. In gang violence in the different provinces, drive-by shootings are on the increase and, most recently, the eliminating of witnesses awaiting appearances in court cases involving gangsters. From these different statistics it is therefore only too apparent that the increased availability of firearms for criminal use is having an ever-increasing effect on crimes involving firearms.

Although the smuggling of firearms into and through South Africa by criminals and organised crime syndicates continues, large-scale smuggling for political reasons has decreased dramatically since the first democratic elections in 1994. Joint operations between the Mozambican police and the SAPS have been successful in destroying hundreds of tons of weapons and ammunition inside Mozambique, preventing them from being smuggled

into South Africa. However, crossborder smuggling is still a real threat and the police remain alert to smugglers and organised crime rings dealing in weapons. The porous borders between South Africa and its neighbours are difficult to police. For instance, military weapons that went missing from the Lesotho Army base during the SADC intervention in Lesotho in 1998 could find their way into the hands of criminals in South Africa.

Internal sources of illegal firearms in South Africa

The identification of sources of illegal firearms internal to the country and the gaining of control over them are among the most important tasks to be addressed, if firearm-related crime is to be curbed in South Africa. Within South Africa, major sources of arms currently fuelling the illicit market result from the theft or loss of state-controlled firearms; the theft or loss of firearms owned by defence force and police service members (200 000 weapons); firearms lost by or stolen from civilians (150 000 weapons); and firearm-smuggling (quantity of weapons unknown). Other sources of firearms, although minor, include the illegal imports of firearms and those left by international hunters as part payment for the hunt or as a gift to the outfitter.

Stolen State Firearms

State-controlled firearms include all those under the control of the SANDF, the SAPS and any government or provincial department to which firearms are assigned. Thefts from state armouries are often well-organised and usually carried out with the assistance of a person working inside the armoury or one with knowledge of its security procedures.

In the Western Cape, the armed theft of firearms and ammunition from police stations is emerging as a new trend. Such thefts include assault rifles, pistols, ammunition and other police equipment. From January to June 1999, 38 assault rifles, 24 shotguns and 32 9mm pistols were stolen from police stations in the Western Cape. It is believed that gangs and vigilante groups are responsible for these robberies, using the stolen weapons for the ongoing drug and gang wars on the Cape Flats.

The SAPS and SANDF are armed with firearms as a result of the nature of their work – making them targets for criminals in search of firearms. In

1998, 224 police officials were killed on and off duty, many believed to have been killed for their firearms. Currently, this is not a significant source of firearms to the illicit market, but the recent trend of attacks on police stations and the robbery of firearms could be a taste of things to come. A large number of weapons are also lost by members of the security force through negligence. For example, these are left by their bearers in a toilet or an unattended car. In 1998, a total of 1 775 firearms were either lost or stolen from members of the police service.

Stolen Private Firearms

One of the most significant sources of firearms to the illicit market in South Africa is legal firearms which are stolen from their owners (licit weapons becoming illicit). A conservative estimate of the extent of the contribution by legal firearm owners to the illicit market is calculated from two statistical sources. The first is the number of firearms lost by their licenced owners. This could occur as a result of negligence on the part of the firearm owner through absent-mindedness, irresponsible management and neglect. The second is the number of firearms stolen, referred to as the *theft* of firearms. The onus of the licence holder is to safeguard his/her weapon. To this end, licence conditions stipulate safe storage and carrying criteria for licence holders. Taking both these figures together, the available statistics between 1994 and 1998 show that the number of firearms reported lost and the number of firearms lost through theft have risen steadily, from 7 285 in 1994 to 29 964 in 1998. The Department for Safety and Security cited a substantially inflated figure, with an estimated 150 000 firearms lost by private firearm owners currently in circulation in the illegal firearms pool (see table 1 above).

While owners are required by law to report the loss or theft of their firearms, the stiff penalties (including forfeiting the right of ownership if the loss is through negligence) may dissuade people from reporting lost weapons to the police. According to the head of the SAPS Illegal Firearm Unit, Senior Superintendent Brandt, 70% of all illegal guns in South Africa are licenced firearms that have been stolen in South Africa.

In March 1999, in response to a question from parliament, the minister of Safety and Security, Sydney Mufamadi, stated that a total of 29 694 firearms had been reported stolen to the SAPS in 1998, including those lost or stolen

Table 7 – Loss and theft of firearms between 1994 and 1998

YEAR	NUMBER OF FIREARMS STOLEN OR LOST
1994	7 285
1995	9 109
1996	13 746
1997	16 963
1998	29 694

Source: SAPS Crime Information and Analysis Centre and response to parliament by minister of Safety and Security, Sydney Mufamadi, March 1999.

from police and defence force members. This figure has since grown to 30 220 firearms reported to the SAPS as lost or stolen in 1998. During the same period, 20 682 firearms were recovered. This includes legal firearms seized from their owners.

Criminals are also well aware of the growing number of South Africans who are buying firearms because they feel unsafe as a result of the increase in violent crimes. This is evident in crimes involving firearms, like armed robbery. In 1996, there were 51 005 reported cases compared to 69 501 cases in 1998. Over the same period, there were 2 014 attempted armed robberies in 1996 and 4 703 reported attempts in 1998. Murder with a firearm has risen from 11 134 reported cases in 1994 to 12 267 in 1998. During the same period, there were 23 682 attempted murders with a firearm in 1994, compared to a reduction to 22 001 in 1998. Other firearm-related offences, like the negligent use of a firearm, rose from 2 895 cases in 1996 to 3 384 in 1998. The illegal firing of a firearm in a municipal area rose from 2 791 cases in 1996 to 3 098 in 1998. The pointing of a firearm also rose from 22 742 reported cases in 1996 to 25 375 in 1998.

The high level of legal firearm ownership in South Africa is not the cause, but the result of the soaring violent crime rate. From 1994 to 1998, there was an increase in the number of firearm licences approved for private firearm owners and, over the same period, an increase in the theft from and negligent loss of firearms by private owners. In 1994, the number of firearms reported stolen was 7 285 and in 1998 it was 11 391, indicating an

increase of 56.4%. The reported number of the negligent loss of firearms in 1996 was 4 729 and 6 231 in 1998. This increase in the theft from and negligent loss of firearms by private owners is believed to be higher than the official reported number. There is underreporting of these crimes, since firearm owners fear that they will be declared unfit to possess a firearm if its loss is proved to be as a result of their negligence. South African data shows an increase, between 1994 and 1998, from 14 460 to 20 682 illegal firearms recovered by the SAPS.

As indicated previously, the theft and loss of weapons are presumably becoming the largest source of illegal weapons in the country. There have been several high profile thefts of weapons from state armouries and local police stations. However, less publicised thefts of this type are occurring frequently. Weapons are lost not only by means of theft, but also through negligence and other means. Such weapons could have belonged to the security forces (police and defence), private security industry employees or citizens.

Homemade Firearms

An information gap exists with regard to homemade firearms and their role in crime. Statistics available on the recovery of homemade firearms by FIUs show an increase in the seizure of this type of firearms, but they form a small part of the total recovered firearms. A total of 3 123 homemade firearms were recovered in 1994 and 2 713 in 1995, indicating a decrease of 13%. However, this rate increased in 1996, with 2 806 homemade firearms being recovered; in 1997, 2 954 were recovered; and, in 1998, 3 066 were recovered.

The nature of homemade firearms makes their recovery more difficult than that of conventional firearms. Most homemade firearms are of excellent quality and a high level of proficiency, and are usually manufactured by people who have an engineering or gunsmithing background, or a sound knowledge of the working mechanisms of firearms or ballistics. Some homemade firearms are capable of firing only one round of ammunition, after which they are of no further use to the operator. The quality of homemade firearms varies. Some are easily identifiable as such, while others display a high level of craftsmanship.

In the manufacture of homemade firearms, a variety of materials are used that make them more difficult to identify. Historically, these firearms were used in

faction fighting or manufactured by 'right wingers'. The most common form of homemade firearms is the pipe-gun. These firearms do not circulate among different users as much as other firearms, since they are usually manufactured by the actual users and not mass-produced. Due to their nature and the difficulty experienced in identifying them, there is a low recovery rate of these firearms. The statement made in the report to the minister for Safety and Security on the control of firearms in South Africa that was approved by cabinet in 1999, that there are tens of thousands of homemade firearms in circulation, only shows the seriousness of this undetected type of firearm.

The Use of Illicit Firearms

Criminals and criminal syndicates in the country use most of the firearms stolen or smuggled into South Africa. A consideration of cash-in-transit robberies or carjackings clearly shows the organised manner in which these violent crimes are executed. However, firearm flows also occur from Southern Africa into conflict regions, for example, from Mozambique to Central Africa, where they fuel civil wars being waged in the region. Most of these arms flows or transfers of arms are illegal and controlled by arms brokers in the region.

Firearms play an important role in violent crime in South Africa. In many of these crimes, criminals use firearms as instruments of force in attacks on their victims. The relationship between the availability of firearms and their criminal purpose becomes clearer when different categories of violent crime are considered. These are mainly bank robberies, vehicle hijackings, cash-in-transit robberies, and attacks on farms and smallholdings.

Armed Bank Robberies

According to the SAPS, a total of 584 bank robberies were reported nationally between January 1997 and March 1998. Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal accounted for 58% of all South African bank robberies. These two provinces are singled out, as they are the main financial provinces, more densely populated than the others in the country and have high unemployment and crime rates.

Handguns are the firearms favoured by criminals in the robbery of banks or financial institutions because they are easily concealed and lightweight. In

6.5% of reported robberies, AK-47 assault rifles were used; hand-grenades were used in 6.1%; shotguns in 3.1%; and in 7.8% of reported robberies, the victim was handed a note of instruction, without any armed hold-up occurring.

Hijacking of Vehicles

The hijacking of motor vehicles occurs daily in South Africa and remains one of the country's most violent crimes. Hijackers appear to attach little value to the lives of humans, not hesitating to kill their victims if they detect resistance. In the South African context, as mentioned above, there is an increase in crimes involving firearms. Vehicle hijackings increased from 6 683 in 1995 to 15 111 in 1998, an increase of 12.6%. But the shock is the 24.1% increase in truck hijacking over the same period, with 1 695 reported cases in 1995, and 5 773 in 1998. Firearms, most frequently handguns, were used in the majority of these hijackings.

This trend seems to be continuing. Between January and March 1998, a total of 7 073 vehicles were reported hijacked, an increase of 10.6% over the same period the previous year. Throughout all provinces, except the Free State, there was an increase in the occurrence of vehicle hijackings. Gauteng remains the province with the highest incidence of hijackings, followed by KwaZulu-Natal. Firearms were used in the majority of reported hijackings. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, 87% of vehicle hijackings were committed with firearms. Similar to bank robberies, handguns are the most frequently used.

Cash-in-transit Robberies

There has also been an increase in robberies with firearms in the last few years. These include cash-in-transit robberies and bank robberies. Available statistics indicate an increase from 51 005 robberies with a firearm in 1996 to 69 501 in 1998, excluding attempted robberies. Again, the firearm of choice in robberies is a handgun, except in the case of cash-in-transit robberies where assault rifles are the preferred weapons of criminals. Due to the violent nature of this crime and the prominent media attention it receives, the SAPS have declared cash-in-transit theft a priority crime. As such, it has been given specialised attention and resources have been channelled for its investigation and prevention.

In most cash-in-transit robberies, assault rifles (for example, the AK-47, R4 and R5) are used. This differs fundamentally from vehicle hijackings and

bank robberies, where hand-held firearms are mostly used. One of the distinguishing features of this type of robbery is that the level of concealment is low, making the nature of cash-in-transit robberies in South Africa interesting: the display of force is overt, there is little attempt by the culprits to minimise the public witnessing of these incidents, and rifles, as opposed to handguns, are used. Of these, automatic rifles are the weapons given preference, as they have greater firepower, relatively speaking.

Attacks on Smallholdings and Farms

The preliminary figures for 1998 indicate an increase in the number of attacks on farms and smallholdings reported to the SAPS, with a relatively larger increase in the attacks reported in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape. During 1997, there were 443 attacks reported which resulted in 84 deaths, while there were 364 attacks with 65 deaths in the first period of 1998. In most of the reported incidences, farmers were ambushed before entering their properties. In 1997, 66.1% of attacks on farms or smallholdings were committed with firearms. Police statistics show that handguns are the firearms favoured by attackers. In only ten cases were assault rifles used. Attacks on farms and smallholdings also showed an increase from 1997 to 1998. In 1997, 66.1% of all attacks on farms and smallholdings were committed with firearms, the handgun being the weapon most frequently used by perpetrators.

Murders

As previously stated, murder with a firearm has risen from 11 134 reported cases in 1994 to 12 267 in 1998. Yet, while the overall level of murder with a firearm is increasing, the murder rate has decreased from 26 832 in 1994 to 24 875 in 1998. The higher proportion of firearms used in murders is reflective of a general increase in the number of firearms in circulation. Observation shows that people are feeling more insecure than in previous years and, as a result, arming themselves. It is suspected that the acquisition of weapons is not necessarily accompanied by competency training in firearm usage. Additional research is required to substantiate these observations.

Concluding Remarks

The difficulty posed by the lack of reliable statistics on the extent of illegal firearms in circulation may never be overcome. The task of tracking the

extent of the problem of illegal firearms is undertaken using the figures available on crimes committed with firearms, and firearms lost through negligent circumstances. In the absence of more reliable information, the figures available are used to provide indications of the current situation. The dynamics underlying the difficulty of tracking the extent of illegal firearm circulation imply that the problem of unreliable statistics is likely to continue. This means that government prioritisation of illegal firearms and the crimes committed with them should not necessarily be linked to the statistics available. Illegal firearms should be seen as problematic to South Africa and the South African region at a moral and humanitarian level.

Sources of illegal firearms are not static: they shift according to factors of supply and demand. However, a clear economic argument for the availability of weapons is not sufficient to account for the wide availability of weapons in South Africa. This ease of access to weapons, as a result of the negligent loss or irresponsible management of firearms, combined with the ease with which legal firearm owners obtain weapons influences the equation, as does the cultural context in South Africa, which legitimises the ownership and possession of a firearm.

As has been stated, illegal firearms are characteristically used in armed robberies, the hijacking of vehicles, cash-in-transit heists and attacks on smallholdings and farms. The impact of each of these incidents of crime could be reduced, if the tools of operation were removed from criminals. It is thus to be hoped that the present overview of the various sources of illegal firearms will provide assistance to the government as it focuses its efforts on reducing the circulation of illegal firearms.