



POLICY BRIEF

Farm attacks in South Africa: setting the record straight

Gareth Newham and Lizette Lancaster

Farm attacks are a serious crime problem requiring dedicated law enforcement attention, but they do not amount to genocide. They represent a small part of violent crime overall in South Africa and their patterns are consistent with criminal rather than political motives. Recent statistics show a decline in violent farm crime. Effective rural safety solutions include stronger policing, community cooperation and tackling the root causes of South Africa's broader crime challenges.

Key findings

- ▶ Two major independent inquiries found no evidence of orchestrated campaigns against white farmers.
- ▶ There is no evidence of any form of genocide taking place in South Africa.
- ▶ White people are statistically less at risk of violent crime than other racial groups.
- ▶ A vast majority of farm attacks are motivated by robbery, not racial hatred.¹
- ▶ In the 2023–2024 financial year, 49 murders occurred on farms (not all victims were white farmers) compared to 27 621 murders nationally. 'Farm murders' represent 0.2% of all murders.
- ▶ Half of all murders in South Africa occurred in just 12% of police precincts. Most of these high-murder areas are townships in metropolitan areas inhabited largely by black residents.
- ▶ From 2016–2021, the conviction rate for farm murders was 18%. Although low, it was higher than the national murder conviction rate of 13% for that period.
- ▶ Low and declining police detection rates occur for all crime categories, not just farm-related crimes.
- ▶ Armed robberies are perpetrated by relatively few repeat offenders, which means better police intelligence and investigative capabilities would reduce these attacks in rural and urban areas.

Recommendations

- ▶ The South African Police Service's (SAPS) crime statistics for rural communities are widely accepted as accurate. Groups compiling their own data should meet with the SAPS Crime Registrar to align definitions under the Rural Safety Strategy (RSS).
- ▶ Rural Safety Forums at designated police stations, supported by partners, should monitor case detection rates and track outcomes in court. Gaps should be identified and addressed through coordinated multi-sectoral plans.
- ▶ Effective RSS implementation and partnerships have yielded results in several communities. These best practices should be documented and replicated where appropriate.
- ▶ Agricultural unions, the SAPS, private security and community leaders should actively counter misinformation and false narratives circulating via social media and other platforms.
- ▶ Armed robberies in urban and rural areas are often committed by repeat offenders. These robberies and firearm-related crimes should be systematically investigated by linking dockets in which crimes have similar modus operandi, suspects or weapons across districts and provinces with prosecutor-guided coordination.
- ▶ Robbery hotspots should be continuously identified and intelligence strengthened in those areas. The ISS has published recommendations for strengthening policing efforts.²

Introduction

This document provides a factual analysis of what are often termed ‘farm attacks’ and ‘farm murders’ in South Africa. The analysis contained herein is based on data from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), the South African Police Service (SAPS) and other independent research organisations.

South Africa has a very high rate of violent crime, with a murder rate of around 45 per 100 000 people. However, the vast majority of the 62 million people living in South Africa are not violent and do not engage in criminality. The 27 621 murders recorded during the 2023–2024 financial year were committed by a tiny fraction of the population.³

Most murders and violent crimes recorded by the police are the result of interpersonal violence. To a lesser but significant extent, murders are the result of criminality, such as armed robberies or conflict between organised criminal groups. Regardless of the circumstances leading to a murder, this crime causes severe trauma for the loved ones, friends and acquaintances of the victim and often those who witness or need to respond to the murder.

Murders are not randomly distributed across South Africa but occur in specific geographical areas. Half of all murders occur in about 12% of policing precincts, and 20% occur in fewer than 3% of precincts. Most of these precincts are in metropolitan areas or in townships or underdeveloped areas on the outskirts of large cities.

This policy brief aims to differentiate fact from fiction regarding violent crime in rural areas, particularly crimes affecting farming communities and highlight efforts to address violence in South Africa. It explains why the country is so violent, why there is no evidence of a genocide, who the rural victims are and how attacks on farms are defined. The final sections present detection and conviction rates for murder and reflect on the SAPS’s Rural Safety Strategy (RSS).

South Africa’s violence problem

There are no simple explanations for South Africa’s high levels of violence. This is because there are not one or two key reasons, but rather, an interplay of a large range of systemic, complex and dynamic factors, some of which change over time or location.

Most murders are the outcome of conflicts or disagreements between young men, who have often been drinking alcohol.⁴ In some places, murders are linked to various forms of violent organised crime, such as robberies or conflicts between criminal networks or groups. A key factor contributing to many murders and various forms of violent crime is the availability of illegal firearms.

South Africa has a long history of violence and conflict dating back to pre-colonial and colonial times. Between 1913 and 1994, the state controlled by white people used violence to oppress the black, coloured and Indian population. This included large-scale forced removals of people from their land without compensation, detention without trial, torture, assassinations and, in the period 1991–1993, mass murders. Brutal state repression and the resistance to it contributed to violence seeping into many parts of South African life and experience.

This policy brief explains why the country is so violent and why there is no evidence of a genocide

With the advent of democracy on 27 April 1994, South Africa experienced significant shifts in violence trends. As political conflict subsided and a new government took steps to protect rights, reverse past discrimination and expand public services for everyone, levels of violence started to decline. From 1994–2012, the murder rate dropped by 55%, from 67 to 30 per 100 000. Contributing factors included economic growth, increased government grants, improved public services, such as education and health, and efforts to reform the SAPS from a militarised force into a public service.

Between 2000 and 2010, rigorous enforcement of the Firearms Control Act led to hundreds of thousands of firearms being removed from the streets and destroyed. As a result, gunshot-related murders dropped by half across all categories of victims. With South Africa winning the rights to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup, major investments were made in police training and equipment, alongside improved partnerships between the state and non-state organisations, both nationally

and internationally. This period saw improved citizen trust in the state and strong national unity.

However, in 2009, a new administration initiated what would later be termed ‘State Capture’ – a project of grand corruption at the highest levels of government. Key members of the ruling elite deliberately repurposed and weakened the state’s intelligence and criminal justice agencies. This project was highly successful but led to declining public trust in the government and created space for criminality, particularly violent organised crime, to grow. The number of illegal firearms on the streets increased, partly due to theft and loss of government stocks, as well as from private citizens and security companies. Police corruption and inefficiencies in the Central Firearm Registry also played a role.

Although the ‘State Capture’ project formally ended in 2018 with a change in presidency, corruption remained deeply embedded within the political elite and across government departments at all levels. While some limited reforms were introduced to address corruption in state entities and the criminal justice system, there

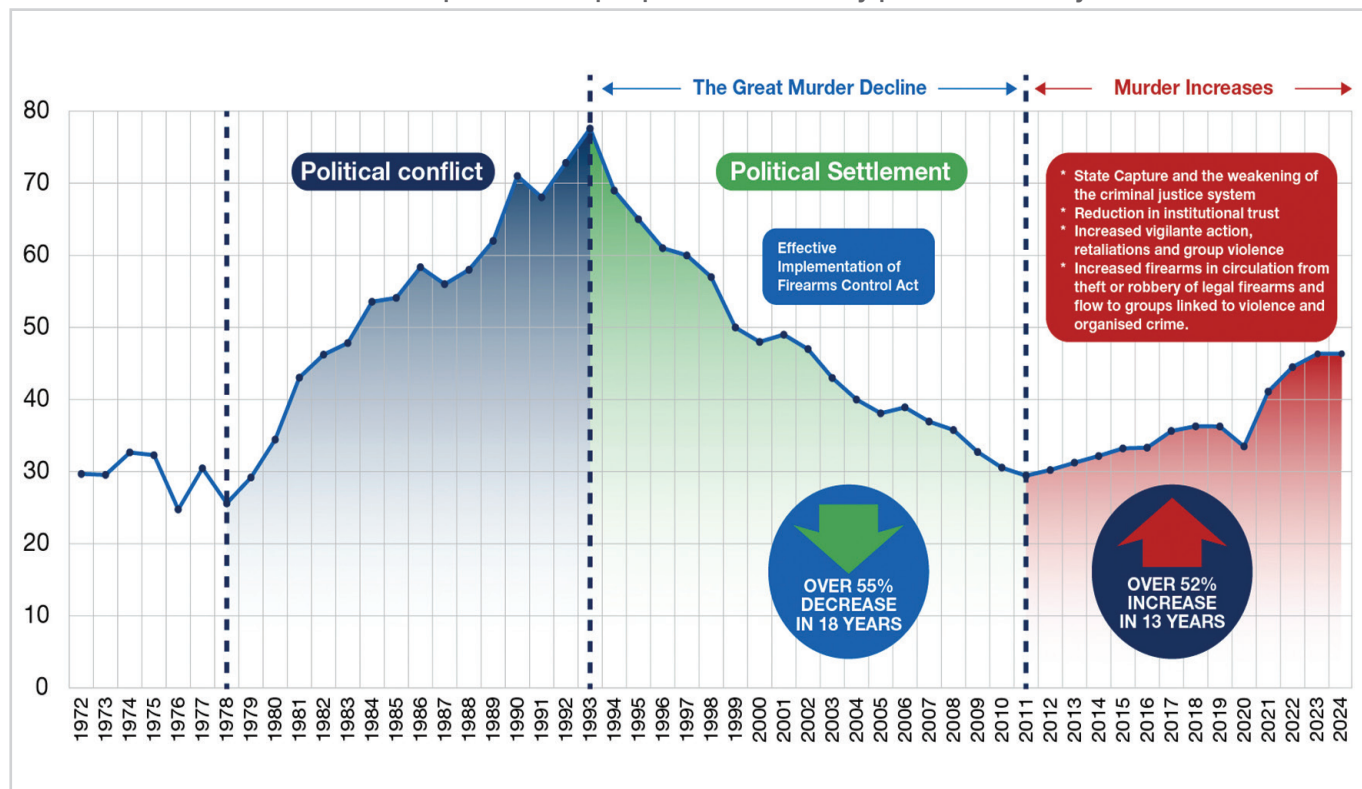
was little political will to support the wide-ranging changes needed to restore their effectiveness.

Consequently, the country’s security and criminal justice agencies remained on the back foot. This was starkly demonstrated by their failure to prevent or contain the widespread violence that erupted in 2021, triggered by supporters of former president Jacob Zuma. Aside from the temporary decline in violence during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2021, the murder rate rose by 52% over the 13-year period ending in 2024.

Key members of the ruling elite deliberately weakened the state’s intelligence and criminal justice agencies

Corruption at all levels of government gave rise to the proliferation of local criminal groups that became embedded in many urban and rural communities, contributing to an increase in illicit firearms, drug trafficking, robbery, extortion, kidnapping, sexual offences and murder.

Chart 1: South Africa’s murder rate per 100 000 people as recorded by police over 50+ years



Sources: Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime, Strategic Organised Crime Risk Assessment: South Africa, 2022 and Institute for Security Studies, 2023 and 2024

Since the new Government of National Unity took office in 2024, policing reform efforts have been more meaningful than any in the last 15 years. Though still in the early stages, if sustained, the police service's vast size – more than 185 000 personnel – and R124 billion budget could begin to show results. Nevertheless, wide-ranging reforms are still needed for the criminal justice system to function effectively. Realising these reforms will require political change to dismantle entrenched criminal syndicates and high-level corruption; a challenge not unique to South Africa but part of a global trend.

There is cause for some optimism as, for the first time since 2012 (except for the COVID-19 period), the annual murder rate for the 2024–2025 financial year has declined, with rates close to 40 murders per 100 000. It remains unclear whether this drop in murder and other forms of violence will continue. However, without the large-scale reforms necessary to measurably improve the capability and performance of the criminal justice system, public trust in the police and government is likely to remain low.

Generally, state security and criminal justice agencies display little accountability and transparency and a high degree of internal and interdepartmental mistrust

This situation provides naysayers and conspiracy theorists with ample ammunition to distract the public by blaming violence on simplistic factors with little impact on public safety. For example, foreign nationals, declining morals, corrupted youth, or high levels of poverty are not the primary drivers of violence and murder in South Africa. Addressing interpersonal violence, especially its intergenerational nature, requires more than just improvements to the criminal justice system.

To support this, the ISS has been working with the government, non-governmental organisations, researchers and now the private sector to generate and supply the best available evidence for preventing violence at scale through primary prevention. The Violence Prevention Forum provides a stable platform for cross-sector collaboration to ensure such prevention remains evidence-informed and on the policy agenda.⁵

On the other hand, the large-scale reforms needed to strengthen the rule of law will need to prioritise a fundamental shift in the organisational cultures of state security and criminal justice agencies. Generally, their organisational cultures are characterised by very little accountability and transparency and a high degree of internal and interdepartmental mistrust due to inappropriate political interference. Consequently, these agencies remain trapped in outdated technologies and methodologies, struggle to collaborate, and lack the innovation, flexibility and responsiveness needed to address a fast evolving and diverse crime environment.



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CLOSE TO 40 MURDERS
PER 100 000 PEOPLE

Is there a 'white genocide'?

The idea of a 'white genocide' has been around for many years, propagated by fringe or extremist groups. However, there is no credible evidence to support claims of a 'white genocide' or any form of genocide taking place in South Africa. Multiple independent investigations have found no systematic or organised targeting of white people or farmers based on race or ethnicity, nor any indication that attacks aim to destroy an ethnic group or drive farmers from their land. These investigations include the 2003 Committee of Inquiry into Farm Attacks⁶ and the 2014 South African Human Rights Commission National Investigative Hearings into Safety and Security Challenges in Farming Communities.⁷

Claims of 'white genocide' originate from far-right groups in South Africa and abroad, including ideologies traced back to the American-based convicted neo-Nazi David Lane's 1988 *White Genocide Manifesto*.⁸

At the advent of democracy, feelings of insecurity grew among many white South Africans as apartheid laws – designed to privilege white people while oppressing those classified as non-white people – were scrapped. Fear of a backlash against white people for the crimes committed during apartheid placed many on alert. Consequently, white conservatives and the then largely white-owned media houses were particularly focused on violent crimes against white South Africans. This led to a distortion of the crime picture, enabling misrepresentation and misinformation campaigns.

South Africa's crime statistics show that most armed violent crime occurs in urban areas, mostly in public spaces such as streets or parks, but also in homes and businesses. Murder victimisation correlates more with class, gender and location than race. Lower income and high inequality are linked to higher rates of crime and violence.⁹ About half of all murders take place in just 12% of SAPS precincts, and 20% in fewer than 3% of stations – 30 in total. These areas are mostly townships or poor urban communities, mostly populated by coloured or black African people.

Studies conducted by the South African Medical Research Council in 2009, based on injury mortality data and a random sample of murder case dockets, found that white people are least at risk of being murdered,

followed by Indian and coloured people, with African people being the most at risk.¹⁰ If crime and murder in South Africa were racially motivated, the murder among white people would be higher than their proportion of the population.

There is no evidence of, nor has there ever been, a concerted campaign driven by an organised group, such as a political party or the government, to drive white farmers from their land through violence, as alleged by some groups. If such a campaign existed, there would be direct evidence. The number of attacks on and murders of white farmers would be much higher and show patterns linked to specific events, such as political rallies or notable historical dates, such as the Sharpeville massacre.

There is no evidence of a campaign driven by an organised group to drive white farmers from their land through violence

Much has been made of controversial slogans and historical anti-apartheid songs used by small extremist political parties as evidence of an orchestrated campaign against white farmers. For example, the infamous song *Dubul' ibhunu*, translated as 'Kill the Boer', was originally used to rally people against the apartheid state. Although the song has been the subject of various court cases, there is no evidence to support the claim that it has incited attacks on white farmers.

Victims of attacks in farming communities

Independent inquiries, investigations and SAPS crime reports show that robbery is the primary motive in nearly all farm attacks. A small number of attacks are related to domestic violence or labour-related disputes. Cases with potential racial or political motives – such as slogans written at crime scenes or statements reportedly made by attackers – are exceedingly rare.

Between January and March 2025, six people were murdered on farms or small holdings – two farmers and four employees or residents. Only one victim, a resident, was white.¹¹ Over the same period, 5 727 people were murdered across South Africa – about 64 per day. A 2023 AfriForum report found that 68%

of farm murder victims were over 60 years old, suggesting perceived vulnerability is a key factor.¹²

During this period, 31 749 armed robberies were reported to the police. Armed robberies are particularly violent, often leading to significant material loss, severe trauma or even loss of life. While armed robberies occur predominantly in urban areas, rural communities are also affected.

Independent inquiries, investigations and SA Police Service crime reports show that robbery is the primary motive in nearly all farm attacks

Previous annual statistics show a similar trend. For the 2023–2024 financial year, out of the 27 621 murders recorded nationally, 49 occurred on farms (not all victims were white farmers). Therefore, ‘farm murders’ accounted for just 0.2% of all murders nationwide.¹³

We recognise that statistics mean little if anything at all to those who have lost a loved one, friend or colleague. However, to effectively address a public crisis, such as violent crime in South African society, it is important to have accurate data on the phenomenon.

How are ‘farm attacks’ defined?

The SAPS, agricultural unions and other stakeholders all use the same definition for farm attacks, which are referred to as ‘acts of violence against the farming community’ in the 2011 National RSS:

Acts of violence against person/s on farms and small holdings refer to acts aimed at person/s residing on, working on or visiting farms and small holdings, whether with the intent to murder, rape, rob or inflict bodily harm. In addition, all acts of violence against the infrastructure and property in the rural community aimed at disrupting legal farming activities as a commercial concern, whether the motive/s are related to ideology, land disputes, land issues, revenge, grievances, racist concerns or intimidation, are included.¹⁴

The inclusion of small holdings complicates statistical comparisons as it is difficult to determine how many are involved in legal farming activities as a commercial concern. The challenge lies in ensuring that only small holdings meeting this definition are included for statistical purposes. The SAPS has collaborated with agricultural unions to improve alignment in case reporting. Recently, the SAPS also met with AfriForum and confirmed that police data is comprehensive, despite earlier disputes over accuracy.¹⁵

Detection and conviction rates

The arrest and prosecution rates for perpetrators of farm attacks and related crimes are unacceptably low. However, this does not indicate a lack of

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ACCOUNTED FOR JUST

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NATIONWIDE

concern by the criminal justice system towards white farmers or rural communities. In the 2023–2024 financial year, the SAPS murder detection rate was just 11%.¹⁶ In other words, police were able to identify and link a suspect to a murder in only 11 out of every 100 cases opened. This figure has dropped steadily over the years and is now 65% lower than in 2012, when the detection rate stood at 31%.

Over the past five years, the average conviction rate for murder measured against the number of dockets opened nationally, has been 13%. In comparison, the conviction rate for farm attacks stands at 18%.¹⁷ Therefore, perpetrators of farm murders are more likely to be convicted than those involved in murders generally.

The perpetrators of farm attacks and robberies are predominantly repeat violent offenders. Their activities can be successfully investigated through intelligence-driven policing in collaboration with communities and private security providers.

Does the government take farm attacks seriously?

The South African government has consistently prioritised calls from organised agriculture to implement dedicated measures to curb farm attacks.¹⁸ The first was taken by former president Nelson Mandela, who convened and attended the 1998 Summit on Rural Safety and Security. In his speech, Mandela expressed the government's concern about crime on farms, stating:

This is first and foremost a summit for action against crime, in particular the killings and violence against members of the farming community.

The government deplores the cold-blooded killings that have been taking place on the farms in the past few years. While killings on farms, like crime in general, have been a feature of South African life for many decades, the incidents of murder and assault in farming areas have increased dramatically in recent years.

Beyond the immediate human suffering, lack of security and stability in our rural and farming community causes serious disruption to our economy. It threatens to bring reduced growth or production, loss of wages and profits and

in time unemployment. It brings the spectre of deepening poverty, and potential social instability and upheaval.¹⁹

Following the summit, the SAPS was instructed to reinforce the implementation of the Rural Protection Plan (RPP) and establish the Rural Safety Priority Committee within the National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure at national and provincial levels to oversee and coordinate the RPP's rollout.

Farm attacks and robberies can be successfully investigated through intelligence-driven policing

Despite the successes of the RPP, farm attacks and murders continued, and therefore remained a major concern. During 2001, in response to a request from AgriSA, then minister of safety and security, Steve Tshwete, instructed the national commissioner of police to establish an independent committee of inquiry into farm attacks. The inquiry reviewed all available cases and concluded that the vast majority of attacks were primarily motivated by robbery.²⁰

In 2003, then president Thabo Mbeki unexpectedly and controversially announced that the Commando system, volunteer units made up largely of former soldiers deployed in rural areas, would be phased out over the next six years. He added that the SAPS would replace the Commandos with alternative structures. However, this decision was the death knell for the RPP, as the Commandos had been its cornerstone. The SAPS, also caught off guard by the announcement, quickly proposed replacement structures, including a new sector policing model, a revised police reservist system and the deployment of so-called Area Crime Combating Units.

The Provincial Joint Operational and Intelligence Structures Priority Committee subsequently refocused its attention on implementing the new structures, though the success of these efforts is debatable. In 2011, eight years later, the SAPS introduced a new, more inclusive National Rural Safety Strategy. This strategy relied heavily on the alternative structures announced in 2003 but also aimed to integrate farm and small holding safety into

broader rural safety measures, improve communication and cooperation between the various communities and support rural development more generally. A Rural Safety Priority Committee coordinated these responses and, by 2017, 845 of the 879 rural police precincts had implemented the RSS.²¹

In 2017, the then minister of police, Fikile Mbalula, met with a delegation from the Transvaal Agricultural Union of South Africa to discuss the National RSS and the issue of farm killings. In a media statement on 29 November 2017, the minister committed himself as follows:

... we have agreed that farm killings are and must be a priority. We reiterate the spirit of the Freedom Charter, that South Africa belongs to all those who live in it. Police need to create a conducive environment for farmers to produce and ensure food security for all our people.²²

On 18 June 2018, at a summit on farm murders and stock theft, then Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries director-general Mike Mlengana stated that 'this ongoing scourge of criminal attacks in the farming community ... cannot be left unattended.'²³

The RSS was overhauled and relaunched in 2019,²⁴ broadening its focus to include food security and economic development in addition to safety and emphasising partnerships. The strategy's recent

successes in places seem to be linked to these partnerships with communities and the private sector. Furthermore, specialised units now investigate farm attacks in the same way as other priority crimes.

Rural Safety Forums have been established at most of the 908 police stations identified as rural or urban and rural mix stations. By 31 March 2024, the RSS had been implemented in 862 (95%) of these precincts. However, its implementation has been hindered by shortages in policing resources, infrastructure and capacity in rural areas.²⁵

Conclusion

South Africa's violent crime problem requires political will and dedicated law enforcement. Recent statistics show improvements in violent farm crime as farming communities across the country work with the SAPS, the private sector and their broader communities to implement practical solutions to improve their safety. Since the new police minister's appointment in 2024, the SAPS has intensified efforts to strengthen policing. Effective solutions combine better policing, community cooperation and tackling root causes. These efforts must be based on accurate information and reliable statistics to foster trust in the criminal justice system and improve cooperation between communities and law enforcement.

Notes

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What works for *hotspot* patrols in Cape Town: Promoting high-performance policing

FEBRUARY 2025

ANINE KRIEGLER, VANYA GASTROW AND ASIVE XALI

Africa's first hotspot policing experiment in Cape Town confirms that evidence-based, data-driven deployments can significantly reduce violent crime without extra resources.

Western Cape Government, City of Cape Town, ISS, Hansa Social Foundation, supported by Bayerische Staatskanzlei



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POLICY BRIEF

Targeting firearm crime will make South Africa safer

David Bruce

Firearm crime is rife in South Africa. Mapping it can help ensure police resources are used in a targeted way to reduce firearm-related offences. This policy brief illustrates how firearm crime can be mapped by using police data. It focuses on Gauteng province, which has high levels of gun use by criminals.



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Rethinking anti-corruption in South Africa: pathways to reform

Colette Ashton

This report analyses South Africa's anti-corruption institutions in relation to international good practice. It highlights problems with their functional independence and organisational culture. It identifies a serious gap in the area of prevention. Among the recommendations are that South Africa undertake feasible, incremental improvements to existing institutions and engage the private sector to help prevent and detect corruption.

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ISS INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

Strengthening the SAPS for a safer South Africa

Recommendations for police reform

Justice and Violence Prevention Programme, Institute for Security Studies

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