

# OPERATION SETHUNYA

## Proactive policing can solve the illicit firearms problem

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In 2003 the South African Police Service intensified its efforts to confiscate illegal firearms and check legal owners' compliance with the firearms legislation. The initiative with the highest profile was Operation Sethunya ('firearm') run from April to September 2003. Sethunya was the largest ever police effort in the country focused exclusively on stemming the proliferation of firearms. The amount of weapons and ammunition collected during the operation is impressive, but what impact has it had on the number of illicit firearms in circulation?

The Firearms Control Act (2000) came into force on 1 July 2004. During preparations for the Act's implementation, the South African Police Service (SAPS) developed a five-pillar strategy for combating the proliferation of firearms in South Africa (see box). Between 2003 and 2004, efforts were focused on pillars 2 and 3 of the strategy. Pillar 2 targets control processes and procedures, which includes the training of 640 Designated Firearms Officers during the 2003/04 financial year. Pillar 3 centres on reducing illegal firearms and the criminal use of firearms.

### Five pillars of the SAPS strategy to stem the proliferation of firearms in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

#### *Pillar 1: Develop and maintain appropriate firearm-related regulators*

This pillar focuses on domestic legislation and regulations, national instructions and standing orders issued to manage the flow and possession of firearms in South Africa.

#### *Pillar 2: Develop and maintain effective control processes and procedures regarding firearms*

This pillar supports the implementation of the new Firearms Control Act within the Central Firearms Register and Registrar of Firearms.

#### *Pillar 3: Reduce and eradicate the illegal pool and the criminal use of firearms*

This pillar focuses on the control, detection of illegal origins, tracing, clearance of SAP 13 stores, audit transfer of firearms, and the reduction and management of state-owned firearms.

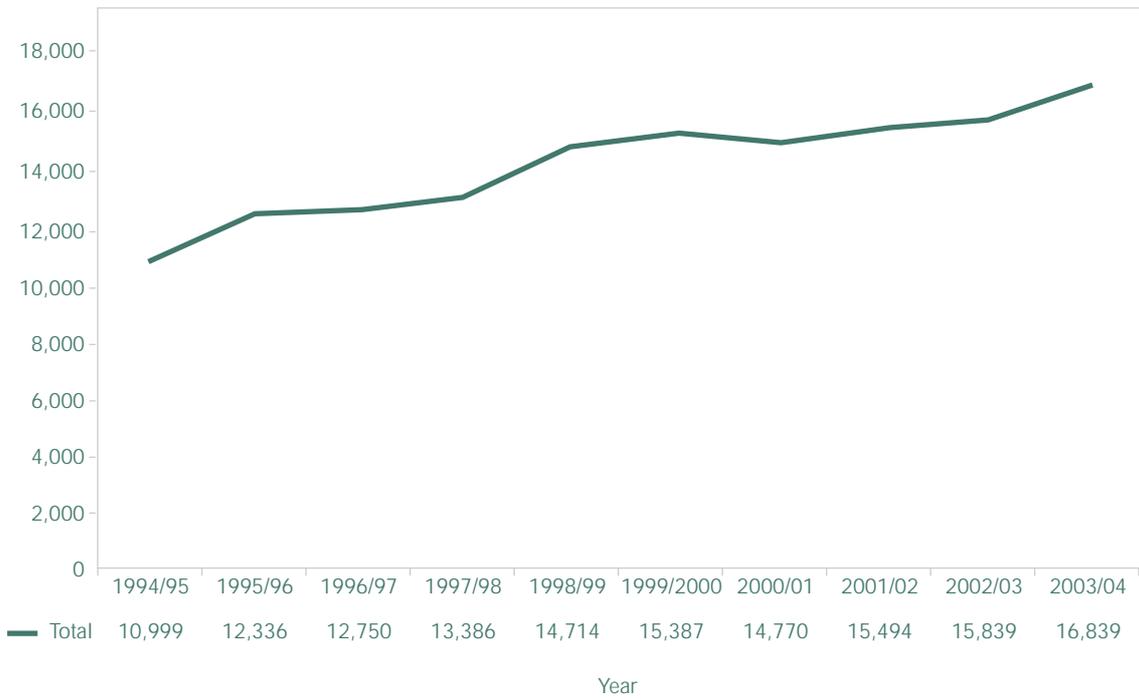
#### *Pillar 4: Prevent crime and violence through awareness and social crime prevention partnerships, including campaigns to educate and raise awareness among the public*

This pillar also includes encouraging responsible ownership and use of legal firearms.

#### *Pillar 5: Develop regional and sector cooperation*

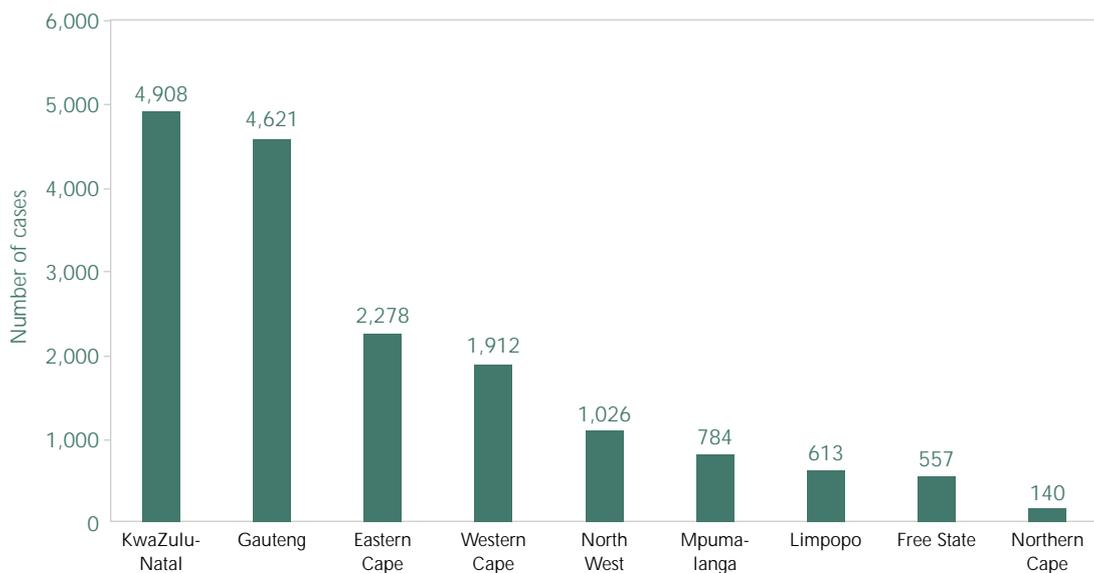
This pillar involves the coordinated planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of firearms initiatives in the region.

Figure 1: Recorded cases of illegal possession of firearms and ammunition in SA, 1994/95-2003/04



Source: SAPS Annual Report, 2003/2004

Figure 2: Recorded cases of illegal possession of firearms and ammunition by province, 2003/04



Source: SAPS Annual Report, 2003/2004

The recording of firearm related offences depends largely on police action because in most cases, there is no 'victim' to report the crime. Statistics provided in the SAPS annual report for 2003/04 show that police interventions focused on firearms seem to be yielding results. Between 1994/95 and 2003/04, recorded cases of illegal possession of firearms and ammunition increased from 10,999 to 16,839 – an acceleration of 53% (Figure 1). In the most recent financial year, cases involving illegal firearms increased by 6% from their levels in 2002/03.

An analysis of geographic trends shows that in 2003/04 the greatest number of cases was recorded in KwaZulu-Natal (4,908), followed by Gauteng (4,621) and the Eastern Cape (2,278) (Figure 2). The provinces that have benefited the most from increased policing of illegal firearms between March 1994 and March 2004 are the Eastern Cape (168% increase in recorded cases), North West (90% increase) and Gauteng (87% increase).

#### Circulation of firearms in South Africa

South Africans own more firearms than citizens of neighbouring countries. Moreover, the volume of firearms in this country places South Africa among the highest in the world for gun ownership calculated on a per capita basis. There are currently more than two million legal firearm owners in

South Africa, with a total of 3,969,200 firearms registered to them.<sup>2</sup> According to the Central Firearms Register, approximately 157,850 applications for firearms are received each year by the SAPS.

The loss and theft of legal firearms is recognised as one source for illegal weapons in the country. An analysis by the Small Arms Survey of annual gun theft ratios shows that South Africa has one of the highest rates of stolen firearms. When guns reported stolen are calculated as a ratio of those legally owned, South Africa has a theft ratio of 1:150. This means that for every 150 licenced firearms, one is stolen. The comparison between South Africa and countries such as Canada, Finland, Australia and the USA, which also have high numbers of legal firearms, is illustrated in Table 1.

More recent data shows that in 2003/04 of the 3,969,200 firearms registered nationally in South Africa, 20,164 were reported lost or stolen.<sup>3</sup> This represents a theft ratio of 1:197 – an improvement on the 2001 ratio shown in Table 1. Nevertheless, the latest theft ratio is still significantly higher than the other countries analysed.

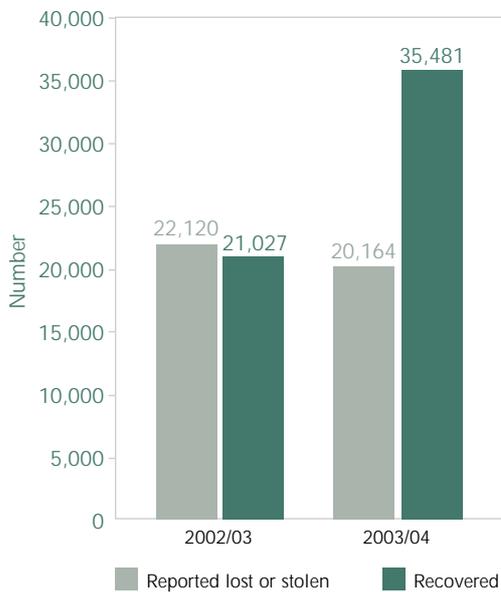
This indicates that the SAPS' focus on encouraging greater responsibility for the safe storage of firearms

Table 1: Selected annual gun theft rates

Country	Year	No. of guns reported stolen	No. of guns legally owned	Theft ratio
South Africa	2001	23,000	3,500,000	1:150
Spain	1996	1,389	3,051,588	1:220
Australia	2001	4,195	2,165,170	1:520
Canada	2001	3,638	1,938,338	1:530
Philippines	1996	1,234	706,148	1:570
England and Wales	1996	3,002	1,793,712	1:600
Sweden	1996	1,400	2,096,798	1:1,500
Finland	1996	932	1,700,000	1:1,820
Norway	1996	339	990,000	1:2,920

Source: Reproduced from the Small Arms Survey 2004, p 63.  
Note: Theft refers to weapons reported lost or stolen to the SAPS.

Figure 3: Firearms reported lost or stolen, and recovered, 2002/03 and 2003/04



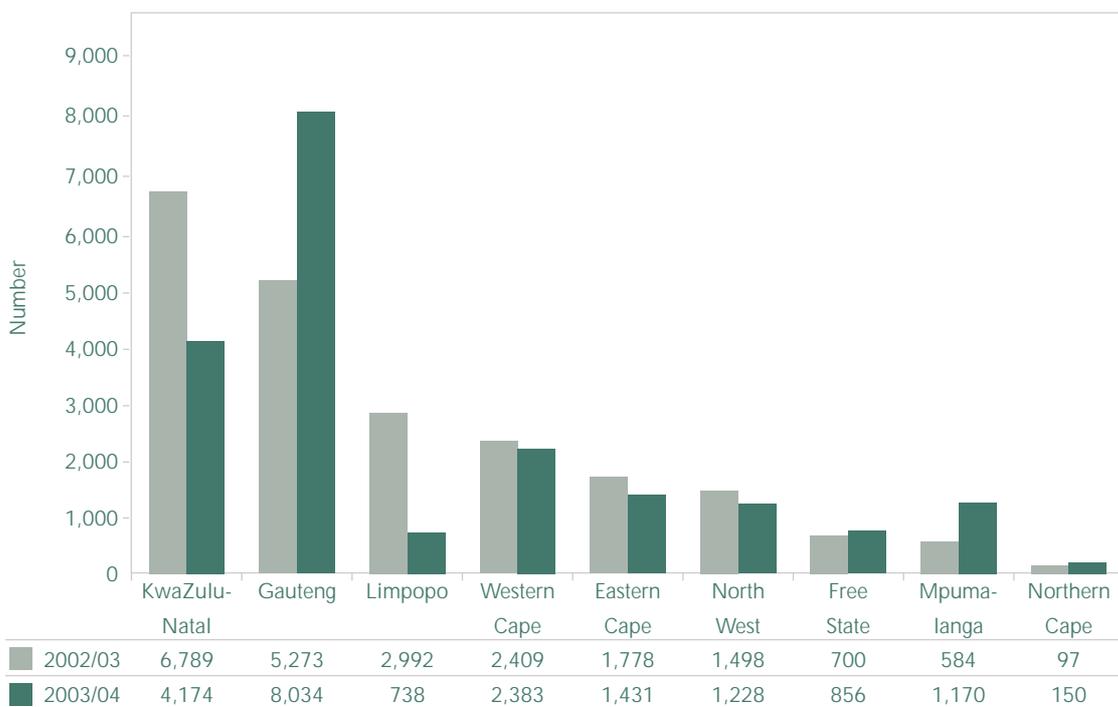
Source: SAPS Annual Reports 2002/03 and 2003/04

by licensed owners makes sense. As part of this approach, the police checked 128,376 licensed firearms to verify that the weapon matched the license, and that regulatory requirements for possessing the firearm were met by the owner.<sup>4</sup>

Each year, a sizeable number of lost and stolen firearms are recovered by the police. In 2003/04 35,481 guns were recovered nationally.<sup>5</sup> Some of these weapons were collected during crime prevention actions that formed part of Operation Sethunya. A comparison of the number of lost or stolen firearms with those recovered by police, shows an improvement in the recovery rate over the past year. Although more guns were lost or stolen than were recovered in 2002/03, this trend was reversed in the last financial year (Figure 3).

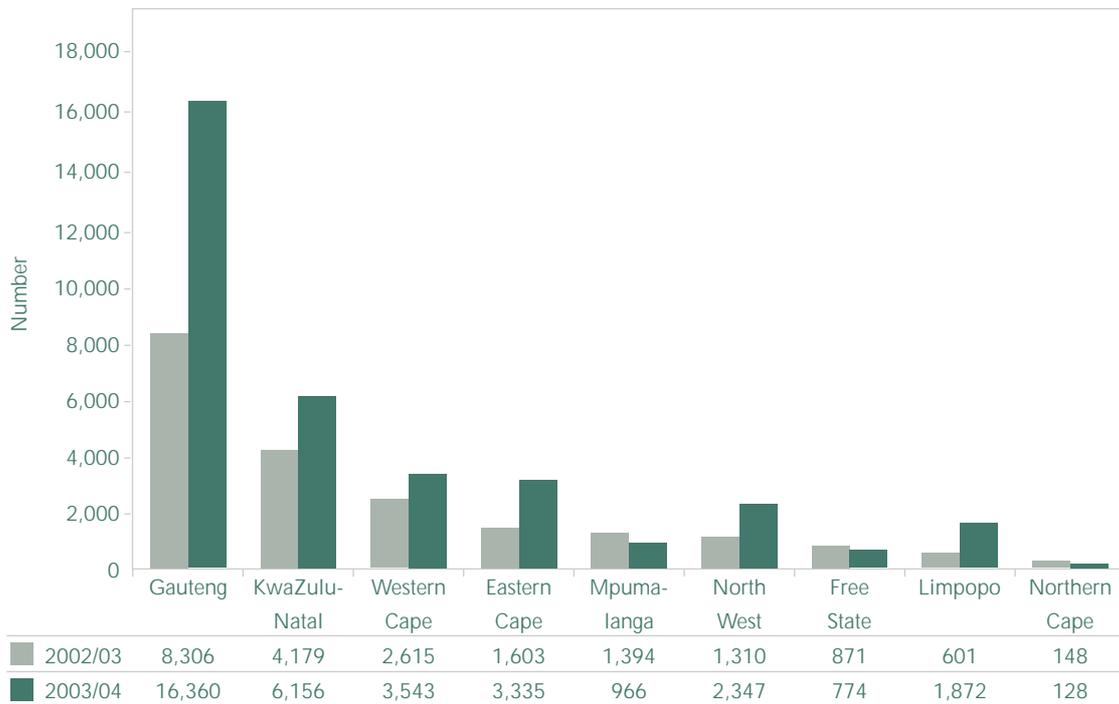
It should however be noted that the firearms reported lost or stolen in one year are not necessarily the same ones that the police recover in that same year. It is nevertheless positive when the number of firearms recovered in a 12-month period

Figure 4: Number of firearms reported lost or stolen by province, 2002/03-2003/04



Source: SAPS Annual Reports 2002/03 and 2003/04

Figure 5: Number of firearms recovered by province, 2002/03-2003/04



Source: SAPS Annual Reports 2002/03 and 2003/04

is greater than the number lost and stolen. These figures should be monitored to establish whether the trend can be sustained.

In its latest annual report, the SAPS committed itself to a 75% recovery rate for lost and stolen firearms in 2004/05. Considering that each recovered firearm will need to be traced back to its legal source, this will be a time and labour intensive effort. If successful, the results will be significant.

An analysis of provincial trends shows that between 2002/03 and 2003/04, most firearms were reported lost or stolen in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal (Figure 4). Most of the recoveries made by police were also recorded in these two provinces (Figure 5). This may correlate with the prevalence of gun ownership and the use of firearms in crime in these provinces, although further research would be needed to verify this.

#### Operation Sethunya as the catalyst

Although reducing illegal firearms has been a SAPS

priority for several years, efforts intensified in 2003 with the launch of Operation Sethunya. The operation indicates that SAPS has adopted a zero tolerance attitude towards illegal guns and the negligent use of firearms and ammunition, focusing on the object of crime rather than the crime itself.

According to Selby Bokaba, spokesperson for SAPS national commissioner Jackie Selebi, "in view of the unacceptable levels of crime in the country, police top management went back to the drawing board after perusing statistical data indicating the majority of violent crimes are committed with firearms. Operation Sethunya was conceptualised to give impetus to the SAPS firearms strategy."<sup>6</sup>

The aim of Operation Sethunya was to reduce the use of firearms – which are easily available in South Africa – in incidents of crime and violence. Specific objectives were to trace and confiscate illegal firearms, and test whether or not citizens were complying with the Arms and Ammunition Act (No 75 of 1969) and its various amendments as

Table 2: Comparison of Operation Sethunya and follow-on period

	Operation Sethunya: Apr–Sept 2003	Normalisation phase: Oct 2003–March 2004	Total
Illegal firearms confiscated	13,859	12,116	25,975
Ammunition	1,562,873	117,067	1,679,940
Arrests for illegal possession of firearms/ammunition	3,082	2,908	5,990

Source: SAPS Annual Report 2003/04

Table 3: Number of firearms destroyed

	1999/00	2001	2002 (through August)	2003/04
Obsolete state stocks	3,346	26,695	33,473	11,568
Confiscated firearms	9,070	3,328	Figure not available	75,529

Source: SAPS Annual Reports, 2001/02, 2002/03 and 2003/04 and S Meek and N Stott, *Destroying Surplus Weapons*.

Note: Periods of data collection vary and are reproduced as presented in the sources used.

well as the new provisions of the Firearms Control Act (No 60 of 2000).

Operation Sethunya was a nationally driven campaign, implemented in all nine provinces. Based on intelligence, it included roadblocks, inspection of premises and 'stop and search' actions, many of which were carried out in crime hotspot areas such as taxi ranks. When necessary and appropriate, the operation was run in conjunction with municipal police officers and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF).

The results of Sethunya are compared with the period following Sethunya in Table 2. The Sethunya results include the confiscation of more than 1.5 million rounds of ammunition and 13,800 illegal firearms. This resulted in more than 3,000 arrests for illegal possession of firearms and/or ammunition.

It is interesting to note that during the normalisation phase that followed Sethunya from October 2003 to the end of the financial year in March 2004, a fairly

high level of firearms confiscation and arrests was sustained (Table 2).

Another important aspect of Operation Sethunya was the destruction of confiscated firearms. The SAPS has an ongoing policy to destroy obsolete and redundant arms as well as illegal or confiscated weapons. With respect to the latter, the aim is to reduce the number of firearms in circulation. In terms of scale and duration, these efforts have been among the most comprehensive undertaken worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

Destruction of confiscated firearms formed an important aspect of Operation Sethunya. Table 3 provides the numbers of firearms destroyed between the financial years 1999/00 and 2003/04. In the past, all destruction of firearms by the SAPS took place in Gauteng. However since August 2003, this process has been decentralised to the provinces.

Operation Sethunya was also used to examine the public's awareness of, and adherence to, the new

Firearms Control Act. Those known to have up to five firearms in their possession were specifically targeted as part of these efforts.

This aspect of the operation involved checking that legal firearm owners have the required facilities for the safe-keeping of their weapons. In particular, safes were checked for compliance the legal requirements and institutions such as arms dealerships were assessed in terms of whether they are registered and complying with the requirements of the Act.

Security companies as well as state institutions also came under the spotlight as the SAPS audited their stocks of weapons. The audit found that at present there are 14,789 firearms in various government departments in South Africa, including 68 provincial institutions, 22 national institutions and 31 museums, excluding state security agencies. In addition, it was established that there were 3,252 registered security businesses, of which 1,643 were in possession of firearms, totalling 58,981 firearms.<sup>8</sup>

Those weapons that were considered prohibited or excess were confiscated. This aspect of the operation also resulted in a number of cases being investigated against institutions and security companies for not complying with the Act with respect to, for example, leaving firearms unattended or not storing them in a safe.

#### **Proactive policing makes a difference**

A review of trends regarding illegal firearms and ammunition in South Africa using data on confiscations and reported cases for the past ten years, suggests that police efforts are showing results. The increase in confiscations of illegal firearms between 1994 and 2004 shows the impact of focused policing efforts, as this crime requires active police engagement for detection.

Likewise, the decrease in the number of lost and stolen firearms together with a simultaneous increase in confiscations, shows a clear reversal of the earlier trend. If this can be sustained, real reductions in the use of firearms in criminal acts may result. Effective monitoring of key indicators such as negligent loss, theft, recovery rates, the use

of firearms in crime, compliance with the legislation, arrest rates for firearm related crimes, and the number of firearms that are destroyed, should provide further evidence about whether the approaches adopted by the SAPS are working.

According to a SAPS assistant police commissioner, "the impact of Operation Sethunya on crime and violence has seen murder cases reported decrease by 8.3%, and attempted murder decrease by 12.6%."<sup>9</sup> While the decrease in the murder rate may not be directly attributable to Operation Sethunya, targeted campaigns do result in a high level of police visibility and increased community awareness. Moreover, the police themselves benefit through more focused training, skills development and allocation of resources.

Operation Sethunya provides clear evidence that South Africa does indeed have a problem with illegal firearms, that the SAPS is capable of addressing the problem especially when it takes a targeted and focused approach, and that the police are serious about implementing the Firearms Control Act.

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 South African Police Service Annual Report, 2003/04, pp 12-15.
- 2 W Hartley, Police chiefs rapped over gun control, *Business Day*, 9 September 2004.
- 3 SAPS Annual Report, op cit, p 12
- 4 SAPS Annual Report, op cit, p 11.
- 5 Ibid, p 12. Calculated based on provincial numbers, not total presented in report.
- 6 S Bokaba, Crime stats were not 'sexed up', *City Press*, 27 September 2003.
- 7 For a recent in-depth analysis and overview of the destruction of small arms and light weapons in South Africa, see S Meek and N Stott, *Destroying Surplus Weapons: An Assessment of Experience in South Africa and Lesotho*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, and Small Arms Survey, 2003.
- 8 Audit reveals thousands of guns in State depts, Mail and Guardian Online, 17 September 2003, <<http://www.mg.co.za/Content/13.asp?ao=20639>>
- 9 Ibid.