

Trend Lines

ARMED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

In the 19 years since South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, the country has made progress in certain areas. In many respects South Africans are materially better off than they were in 1994 and aspects of public safety have improved. Homicides, including gun homicides, have been in steady decline since 1994, and national legislation appears to be partly responsible, though further action is needed. Some socio-economic indicators are similarly improving. But South Africa's income inequality and homicide rates are still among the world's highest, and available evidence suggests that inequality remains an important driver of armed violence.

Since 1994, homicide rates in South Africa have dropped significantly.

South Africa's homicide rate is approximately four times the global average. According to available data, South Africa has had an 'extremely high violent death rate' since 1994, with annual homicide rates above 30 per 100,000 people. The country's highest homicide rates were recorded in 1994, when 66.9 per 100,000 people were killed. By 2011–12, the rate had dropped to 30.9, a 54 per cent decrease (see Figure 6.1).

The chapter provides an overview of trends in armed violence since 1994, focusing on the most recent available data, which covers 2011–12. It highlights some of the factors that appear to inhibit and contribute to armed violence.

The National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMSS) collects data on fatal injuries from medico-legal laboratories and state forensic laboratories. Although the NIMSS coverage has changed over time, it is possible to use the data for a snapshot of intentional gun deaths at the national level for 2008. For this period, firearms are involved in 30 per cent of homicides documented by NIMSS (see Figure 6.3). The chapter also uses NIMSS provincial data to show that the proportion of deaths inflicted by firearms declined by almost 5 per cent in two selected provinces, yet the use of sharp (bladed) weapons rose slightly in Gauteng and increased by 8 per cent in Mpumalanga.

In terms of legislation, the chapter finds that there appears to be a positive correlation between the partial implementation of the Firearms Control Act (FCA) of 2000 and a reduction in firearm homicides. According to research published by South Africa's Medical Research Council, the FCA has contributed to reducing armed violence. Specifically, a 2010 *South African Medical Journal* article that assesses the difference between the trends in firearm and non-firearm homicide rates from 2001 to 2004 concludes that, 'although a decline in both homicide rates is shown, there is a significantly faster decline for the firearm homicide group'.

A follow-up study published in 2012 also confirms that there is a correlation between the gradual implementation of the FCA and lower firearm homicide rates. By comparing the number of women killed in 1999 to the figures of 2009, the study shows a significant

Figure 6.1 **Homicide rate per 100,000, 1994–2012**

RATE PER 100,000 POPULATION

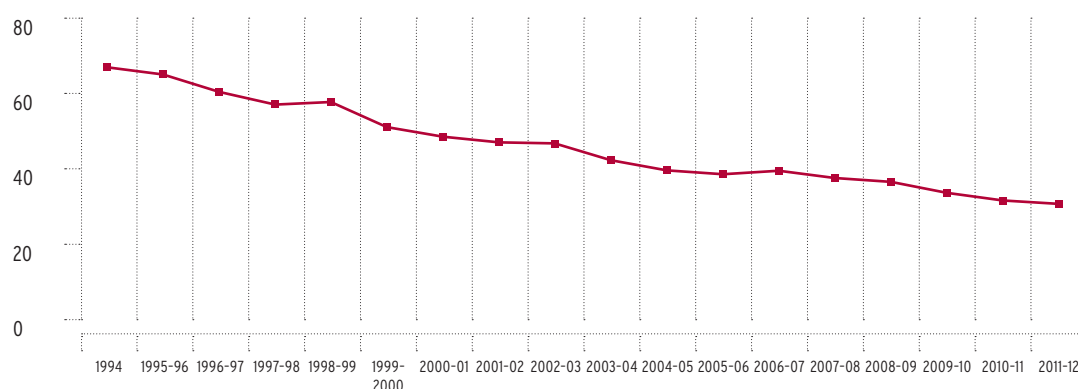
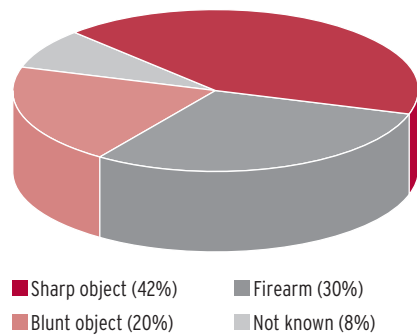


Figure 6.3 Weapons used in homicides, 2008



decrease, with '529 fewer women killed by gunshot in 2009 compared to 1999', a drop that is also associated with the FCA. This finding suggests that better implementation of the law could further reduce levels of firearm homicides.

The chapter also explores the role of the South Africa Police Service (SAPS) in reducing armed violence. While the SAPS should be central in armed violence prevention efforts, its ability to serve this function has been constrained by a range of serious internal problems. Apartheid-era policing practices have been suppressed but not fully transformed, and significant work lies ahead if the SAPS is to reduce, rather than exacerbate, levels of armed violence. Implementing further reform and enforcement procedures related to police use of force and firearms is an important step the government can take in this regard.

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More broadly, perceptions of corruption, misconduct, and a lack of transparency across a number of state agencies persist. The chapter finds that armed violence prevention efforts are undermined by the lack of data on the causes and circumstances of armed violence. Enhanced availability and public access to relevant data on armed violence would strengthen evidence-based armed violence reduction and prevention programming. By publishing disaggregated fatal and non-fatal violence data annually, the government can demonstrate commitment to transparent democratic norms. Doing so would also assist researchers and health professionals in developing firearm violence-specific interventions and evaluating existing programmes that focus on contributing factors for violence, such as alcohol abuse and gender inequality.

The chapter suggests a strong association between high levels of inequality and high levels of armed violence. The South African government's national policies to address and reduce levels of inequality have shown only modest results. Improving socio-economic equality addresses some of the conditions that give rise to violence and can pay dividends in improved health, well-being, and security. ■