

Stop police from arming criminals

One way to slow the death rate down is to cut the number of illegal guns in circulation

CRIME

Koketso Moeti

In 2015, as I walked through Braamfontein to the Gautrain station, I saw a car parked in the middle of the road. I heard whistling and felt cold steel against my temple. I turned and there was a gun to my head.

Despite a few past experiences with violence, this one stayed with me for a long time. Very little has terrified me in the way having a gun pointed at me did. Another young woman came walking by and was held with me. They took my phone and told me to walk and not look back, which I did, leaving her behind. On my arrival at the station, I alerted security about what had happened and saw some men run towards where I had been held. I never found out what had happened to the other woman.

My experience was insignificant compared with the many people who have lost their lives or who live with the consequences of gun violence. It is not the experience of the Mzila family, who lost four family members after gunmen stormed their home and shot them in February this year. Nor is it the experience of the five people, two of whom were chil-

dren, who were killed in their flat in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, in the same month.

Considering the country's problem with violent crime, in particular gun-related violence, it's easy to understand Minister of Police Fikile Mbalula, who in his recent maiden speech called for police to be "merciless" when dealing with "criminals". It was an echo of his days as deputy police minister when he called on police to "shoot the bastards".

But this approach does nothing to address the systems that enable the flow of illegal firearms in the country. It ignores that the majority of illegal guns in the hands of criminals usually start off as legal weapons and that the police themselves significantly contribute to this.

If Mbalula is serious about keeping the police and civilians safe, this is where he needs to put his energy.

On March 13, 30 firearms, including automatic rifles, were stolen during a break-in at Peddie police station's storage facility. At a time when police officers are being targeted for their weapons, it is alarming that security measures are not being improved, especially as this was not an isolated incident.

In 2015 about 20 000 rounds of ammunition, worth almost



Lethal: Keeping track of deadly weapons must be a top priority for the police, argues Koketso Moeti, and no innocent person should lose their life as a result of state negligence. Photo: Reuters

R1-million, was stolen from the Pretoria police station. According to reports, "hundreds of weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition" were being stored in "unprotected and dilapidated buildings" in the city.

The theft of firearms and ammunition is not only in the form of robberies. A former police colonel, Christaan Prinsloo, who was handed an 18-year jail sentence after entering into a plea and sentencing agreement with the state, admitted to supplying weapons and ammunition to criminals.

According to court papers, there are forensic links for 1 066 murders in the Western Cape to about 900 of the estimated 2 400 firearms stolen by Prinsloo. According to a Netwerk24 report, between February 2010 and December 2015, 89 children were killed on the Cape Flats with these guns. Another 170 children were also shot but survived. The guns have also been linked to taxi violence

in both KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

A parliamentary response provided in 2015 by the former police minister, Nathi Nhleko, found that members of the South African Police Service (SAPS) lost 2 356 firearms between 2012 and 2015. This is a marked drop from previous years. But the numbers are still far too high and suggest serious negligence on the part of police.

The police are not the sole source of illegal firearms. The police ministry under Mbalula's predecessors attempted to address this, with the most notable effort being the roll-out of the Integrated Ballistics Identification System in an attempt to hold police officers accountable for the guns assigned to them.

The recovery of some of these firearms, alongside the investigation and conviction of corrupt police officers such as Prinsloo, are testament to the commitment and integrity of most SAPS members.

But this is not enough. Keeping track of deadly weapons must be a

top priority for the police. No innocent person should lose their life as a result of state negligence.

The minister will have to give political life to his commitment to saving lives. A clear plan to reduce corruption and fraud and to address the problems with the implementation of the Firearms Control Act is needed. Harsher penalties for police officers who "lose" their firearms will help to reduce the number of guns making their way into the illegal pool.

Violent crime is a particular characteristic of South Africa's crime rate, which is among the highest in the world. We need a comprehensive plan to reduce the number of guns in circulation.

Koketso Moeti has a background in civic activism and has worked at the intersection of governance, communication and citizen action. She is a 2017 Aspen New Voices Fellow. Follow her on Twitter at @Kmoeti

