THE HISTORY OF GUNS IN SOUTH AFRICA

GUN CONTROL
South Africa’s history of guns starts with colonialism. The first European settlers brought guns with them when they arrived in the Cape in 1652. Guns allowed the settlers to rob and control the indigenous people, the Khoi and San, who did not have such weaponry.

The first firearms-related legislation in 1677 prohibited the sale of rifles, lead and gunpowder to the Khoi and San people. This denial of ownership of legal firearms to the indigenous people was repeated throughout South Africa’s history, until 1984.

The 1905 Firearms and Ammunition Act cancelled all prior related acts, but the prohibition on issuing firearms to black South Africans stayed in place.

It was only in 1984 that the Arms and Ammunition Act was amended to allow people of colour to apply for a firearm licence.

In 1994 there were 3.5 million licensed firearms in the hands of only 2.4 million individuals, mostly white. This was the year that Apartheid came to an end. During this period, about 1500 new applications for firearms were submitted each day. Applications peaked during the first democratic election held in April 1994.

The Firearms Control Act came into law in 2000. The Firearms Control Act (FCA) is the basis for an effective system of firearm control and management in the country.

In 2003 the Black Gun Owners Association was established. Its chairperson, Ablos Khoele advocates for equal treatment of black gun applicants by the FCA. This in the context of a country where people of colour were not historically allowed access to legal guns, therefore obtained illegal ones.

The FCA has been amended several times the last time being in 2006. However, further substantial amendments to the FCA can be expected to come before Parliament in 2018.

EXTRA RESOURCES ON THIS TOPIC

- A brief history of guns in South Africa
- Gun Free South Africa
- South African Military History
AT THE TURN OF THE 19TH CENTURY (1801) AFRICA’S INTERACTION WITH EUROPE WAS DOMINATED BY THE SLAVE TRADE. DURING THE SLAVE TRADE EUROPEAN IMPORTS AND TECHNOLOGIES ENTERED AFRICA. GUNS MADE UP A LARGE PORTION OF THESE IMPORTS.

CAPE TOWN HAS THE HIGHEST RATES OF MURDER, ROBBERY AND PROPERTY-RELATED CRIMES IN SOUTH AFRICA. PEOPLE IN CAPE TOWN HAVE TWICE AS EASY ACCESS TO ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND FIREARMS THAN ANY OTHER CITY IN SOUTH AFRICA.

WHITE SETTLERS DEFEATED POWERFUL AFRICAN KINGDOMS WITH THE FORCE OF FIREARMS. IN THE BATTLE OF BLOOD RIVER IN KWAZULU-NATAL IN 1838, SETTLERS MASSACRED 3000 ZULU SOLDIERS IN 3 HOURS. ONLY 3 SETTLERS WERE WOUNDED. THE ZULU SOLDIERS USED TRADITIONAL WEAPONS, SUCH AS SPEARS.

HANDGUNS, WHICH ARE REVOLVERS AND PISTOLS, ARE LIGHT, DURABLE, RELATIVELY CHEAP AND EASY TO COVER-UP AND CARRY. THEY NEED LITTLE EXPERTISE TO OPERATE. PEOPLE WHO COMMIT CRIMES AND PEOPLE WHO KEEP A GUN IN THE HOME FOR SELF DEFENSE, CHOOSE HANDGUNS.

HOMICIDE RATES IN SOUTH AFRICA HAVE REMAINED AMONG THE HIGHEST IN THE WORLD DESPITE A CONSISTENT DECLINE ELSEWHERE.

SINCE 1994

A nation without guns? The story of Gun Free South Africa by Adele Kirsten

The State of Urban Safety in South Africa Report

Read more about: guns for slaves

Small Arms Survey
DEFINITIONS

WHAT IS COLONIALISM?
The policy or practice of getting full or partial political control over another country by occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it for profit.
Source: What is colonialism?

WHAT IS APARTHEID?
A system of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa between 1948 and 1991.
Source: What was Apartheid?

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?
A form of government in which people choose leaders by voting. Democracy is sometimes referred to as “rule of the majority.”
Source: What is Democracy?
Democracy is...

WHAT IS GUN CONTROL?
Laws that control how guns are sold and used and who can own them.
Source: What is gun control?


“A nation without guns? The story of GFSA

A HISTORY OF ARMED VIOLENCE, GENERATIONAL POVERTY AND INEQUALITY ARE LINKED. COUNTRIES WITH THIS HISTORY ALSO EXPERIENCE DEEPLY ROOTED FORMS OF ARMED VIOLENCE AND RISK REMAINING TRAPPED IN CYCLES OF UNDER-DEVELOPMENT.

“Gun violence is the most dramatic indicator of the social crisis in South Africa today.”

PROFESSOR JACKLYN COCK, PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, 12 SEPTEMBER 2007

A nation without guns? The story of GFSA
# WHY WOULD ANYONE HAVE A GUN: MYTHS AND FACTS

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<th>MYTHS</th>
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<td>All South Africans were always equal before the eyes of the law when applying for a gun licence.</td>
<td>Historically, people of colour could not apply for a gun licence until 1984. In that year the Arms and Ammunition Act (No. 75 1969) was amended to allow people of colour to apply for a firearm licence.</td>
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| Police are here to protect and serve the population and should use their guns as they see fit. | Members of official state institutions, such as the South African Police Service or National Defence Force, do not have to follow many of the rules that apply to ordinary gun owners. Even so, they have a duty to use their guns in a controlled manner:  
  • when on duty, they must carry a handgun in a proper holster  
  • at the end of a period of duty, they must return their firearms to the designated place of storage  
  • when traveling with a firearm, they must carry the firearm in a secure place  
There are certain circumstances when an employee of a state institution may have special permission to:  
  • have the firearm in their possession after working hours  
  • store the firearm at their home and/or  
  • carry the firearm outside the premises of their work place  
Note, the above situations are not the norm, and require special permission. |
| As a civilian gun owner, if you feel threatened shoot first, ask questions later. | The gun owner must be in a situation where he/she feels that their life is in immediate and direct danger in order to shoot.                                                                                   |
| Gun control laws won't work because only those who obey the law will follow gun laws, criminals will not. | Stricter gun controls means that legal guns are not that easy to get, thus reducing the pool of guns. Remember, almost all illegal guns started out legally.                                                   |

"Guns are the greatest threat to human rights in our democracy."

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU ON THE RELEASE OF THE TRC REPORT, SUNDAY INDEPENDENT (1 NOVEMBER 1998)
TO GET YOU THINKING

THE HISTORY OF GUNS IN SA

GUN CONTROL

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Looking at the cartoon, discuss the ways gun control can reduce gun violence.

2. Discuss what kinds of gun laws you would like to introduce to your community to reduce gun violence.

3. Besides introducing stricter gun laws, can you think of other ways that gun violence can be reduced?

DIFFERENT WAYS TO TALK ABOUT THE HISTORY OF GUNS IN SA

These questions can help guide your radio shows and outreach.

You have many examples of how to develop your outreach and radio shows from previous guides. Use them to expand on some of the angles below.

How have guns and power been linked in South Africa?

Guns have complex symbolic meanings in South Africa. Pre-1994, the AK47 was a symbol of resistance and revolution for freedom fighters. For many white people and white farmers, the rifle was a symbol of the army, nationalism and protection against the “swart gevaar.” Are guns symbols for anything these days? If yes, what are they?

Are gun laws the only way to reduce gun violence? If not, what are more ways to stop violence?

Historically, South Africans experienced racial discrimination in the issuing of firearm licences in South Africa. That means people of colour could not access legal guns and instead obtained illegal ones. Is this relevant today? Are people of colour more likely to continue the illegal ownership/use of guns?