VOICES ON ARMS CONTROL



Mothers for justice

Confronting gun violence in South Africa

Gun Free South Africa

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Editorial

Mothers for justice: Confronting gun violence in South Africa

Atlantis/Cape Town, November 2026

Front cover image
March against gun violence on International Peace Day in Atlantis, South Africa. ©Gun Free South Africa

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"Voices on arms control" are small, evidence-based studies by selected civil society organisations which aim to draw attention to pertinent issues of peace, security and human rights that affect local communities in the Global South. This part of the series seeks to shed light on the experiences of communities negatively affected by the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and the deficient systems of SALW control in order to promote and enrich broader debates on SALW control in national, regional and international contexts.

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Gun Free South Africa (GFSA) is an NGO working to reduce gun violence in South Africa through public policy advocacy, education, awareness and community mobilisation. Monique Hansen started as a volunteer for Gun Free South Africa and has been the Program Manager since 2024.

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International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) supports efforts to make people safer through comprehensive measures to avoid excessive and illicit demand for small arms and light weapons, to improve the regulation of such weapons and their ammunition, and to strengthen controls and prohibitions on the transfer and use of such weapons. Using research, advocacy and campaigning, IANSA members are promoting such measures at the local, national, regional and global levels to strengthen human security.

International Peace Information Service (IPIS) is an independent research institute providing tailored information, analysis, capacity enhancement and policy advice to support those actors who want to realise a vision of durable peace, sustainable development and the fulfilment of human rights.

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Executive summary

South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world – its homicide rate is six times the global average and is facilitated by the proliferation and misuse of firearms, which are the leading weapon used to murder, injure, and threaten.

South African youth are disproportionately exposed to high levels of violence in their homes, such as abuse against them or relatives, coercive control and neglect, violence in schools and violence in their communities. With many experiencing multiple traumas as both victims and witnesses, the absence of supportive family structures further exacerbates this pattern of suffering, leading some young people to seek alternative support systems, such as gangs.

This paper shares the stories of six mothers who have lost children to gun violence. Gun Free South Africa (GFSA) has collaborated with mothers from Atlantis and Mitchell's Plain, in Cape Town, Western Cape, and Westbury in Johannesburg, Gauteng, whose sons have been killed by gun violence, to hold police to account and bring these cases to justice. These three communities are amongst many in South Africa that experience high levels of crime and violence, including gun-related violence. This case study examines social and community responses to such tragedies and identifies potential support systems and interventions that can help mothers cope with their loss, increasing their sense of agency and engagement to help achieve justice and improve community safety.

The basic impact of gun violence on mothers is that they are forced to navigate a society where violence is pervasive, and the systems meant to protect them and their children often fall short. The impact of gun violence also extends beyond individual families, affecting entire communities, particularly those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with high rates of unemployment, poverty, and crime.

The main challenges in these cases are:

- Some mothers, supported by GFSA, live with "open cases" that do not reach a conclusion where a prosecution can begin to get justice for their children. Most of these cases were also closed by the investigating authorities because of a lack of evidence, the absence of witnesses, and the fact that no one can be traced to the murder weapon, which adds to distrust in the police and justice system.

- Key challenges include managing the "silent" aftermath of trauma, addressing social isolation/ stigma, and providing consistent, long-term psycho-social support.

- A comprehensive, coherent legal framework is essential to reduce gun availability and needs to be strengthened, thereby reducing and preventing gun-related deaths. Poor enforcement of the law, including corrupt practices, contributes to increases in gun deaths. The current context provides sufficient evidence that the entire South African firearms control regime is ineffective and requires several interventions.

GFSA's work with mothers covers four types of interventions:

- Grief counselling: Many people in under-resourced communities cannot afford to access mental health and grief counselling services. GFSA contracted a social worker who helps the mothers through their grief and builds resilience.

- Support groups: GFSA facilitates support groups to connect the mother with others who have experienced similar trauma.

- Case Management: GFSA works with the local police station and the mothers on their cases to help the mothers navigate the criminal justice system and access resources and services.

- Advocacy: Through counselling and education, mothers feel more empowered to take on fighting for justice for their sons' cases because they know their rights, particularly in the context of the justice system and other institutions, and can help other mothers navigate this.

The impact of this campaign might not be visible externally, but internal changes have been observed. Many of the mothers that GFSA has worked with

can now speak up, tell their stories, and advocate for other mothers. There is a sense of confidence that they gained through the experience of confronting their investigating officers, sitting in court, and gaining knowledge of the police and justice system. Another positive impact from GFSA's approach is the sense of empowerment and even closure that comes from receiving even small pieces of information about their sons' cases.

Further initiatives by GFSA are:

- GFSA advocates for a strong and effective small arms control regime in South Africa. These measures should include strengthening SA's firearms and ammunition management system; advocating for an amendment to the Firearms Control Act to be passed into law.
- GFSA seeks to mobilise grassroots communities against gun-related violence and crime. This includes strengthening the capacity of young men and women to take the lead in community safety initiatives, such as the Gun Free Zones project.
- GFSA works with young men, mostly focusing on understanding gender roles and creating a different narrative of what a non-violent and non-abusive masculinity can look like in the household, workplace, and at school.
- GFSA hosts women's self-defence dialogues to raise awareness of how the Domestic Violence Act and Firearms Control Act can be used to remove a gun in a domestic violence relationship, in collaboration with local organisations. The aim is to build community knowledge and providing community members with the relevant information to act.



▲ **Self-defence class in Atlantis ©Gun Free South Africa**

Introduction

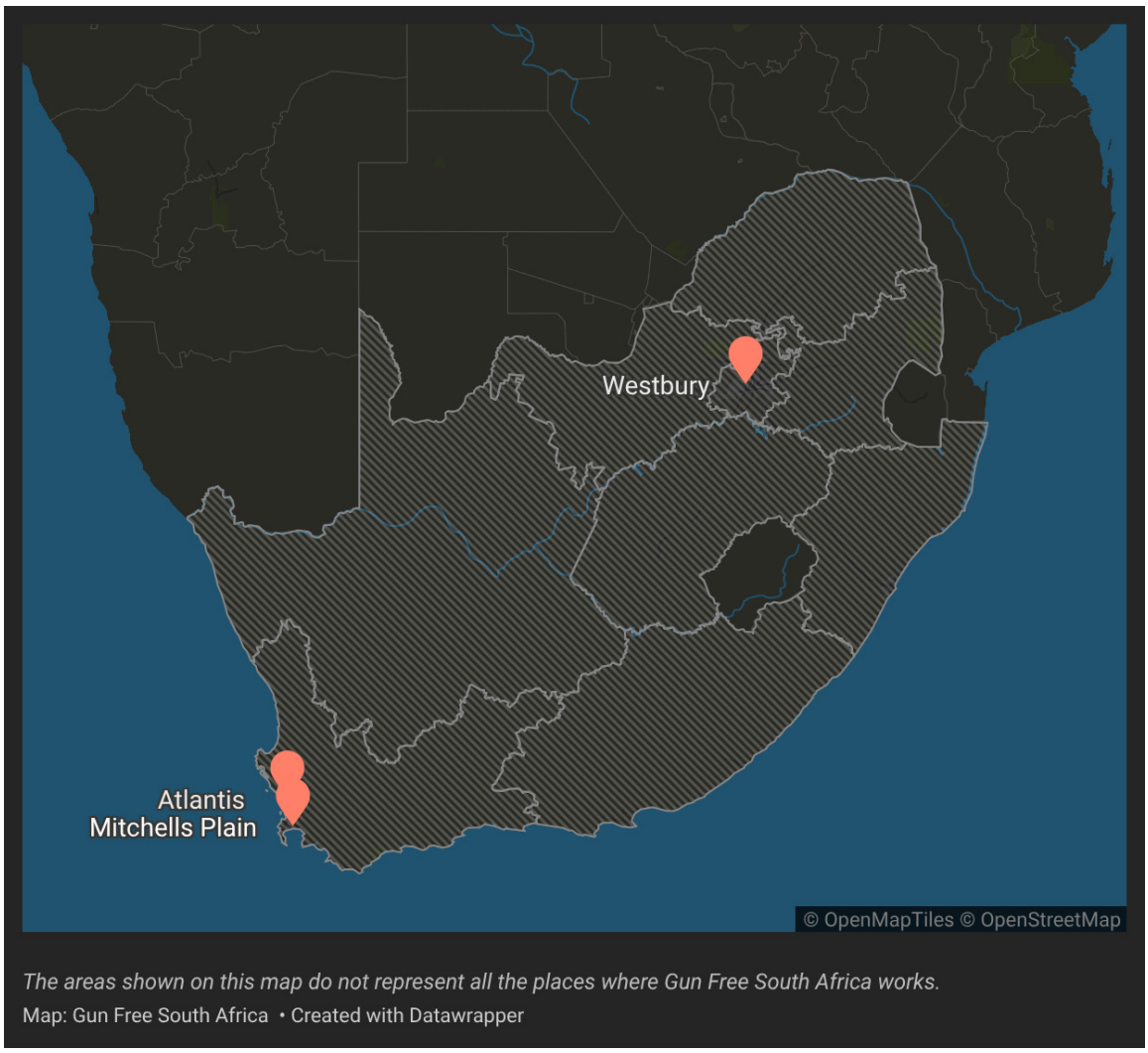
Gun Violence is a prevalent pattern and devastating issue in South Africa, claiming the lives of dozens of children and adults, predominantly young men, every day. South Africa has one of the highest murder rates in the world, with guns the leading weapon used to murder, as well as to commit serious injuries and other abuses. The availability and social acceptability of guns are major contributing factors.

One incident on the 18th of September 2021, involved the killing of Lizario Douglas, the 24-year-old son of Jane Douglas. He was fatally shot in Atlantis, a small town in Cape Town, South Africa. The loss was sudden, senseless, and irreversible, as all gun-related violence is. For Jane, the pain of losing her son to gun violence is a wound that will never fully heal. Such incidents are being perpetrated in their thousands.

Gun Free South Africa (GFSA) has collaborated with six mothers from Atlantis and Mitchell's Plain, in Cape Town, Western Cape, and Westbury in Johannesburg, Gauteng, whose sons have been killed by gun violence, to hold police to account and bring these cases to justice. These are three communities that are amongst many in South Africa that experience high levels of crime and violence, including gun-related violence. The collaboration explores the mothers' experience, emotions, and coping mechanisms in the aftermath of their loss. This case study examines social and community responses to such tragedies and identifies potential support systems and interventions that can help mothers cope with their loss, increasing their sense of agency and engagement to help improve community safety.

The Moms Against Gun Violence campaign started in 2021 with five mothers in Atlantis. The campaign is a grassroots movement of mothers who have lost children due to gun violence, fighting to ensure that these criminal cases are dealt with properly by the local police station, and advocating for stronger gun laws and prevention measures that the state agencies in South Africa will enforce. In particular, the mothers work in communities, specifically with local police stations, to encourage the recovery of illegal guns and educate people about the risks of guns.

The case study focuses specifically on mothers in these communities, their losses and their efforts to achieve justice. In most families, the mothers are usually the primary caregivers. From our experience of working with mothers, they report more intense and prolonged grief symptoms than the fathers, and usually the ones externalising grief through help-seeking, therapy, or advocacy, which makes their experience more accessible for research. Another reason we focus on mothers is that many grassroots movements against gun violence consist of women, especially mothers; they are the ones to testify in court, speak to the media, and drive the conversation of advocacy. This case study reflects the mothers' experiences, their loss of a child to gun violence and their efforts to end gun violence. Those experiences add to the loss of other family members, friends, and victims.



▲ **Lost to guns: Atlantis, Mitchells Plain and Westbury are some areas where mothers lost their sons through gun violence.**

1. Methodology

The research methodology employed in this paper is a qualitative approach, utilising in-depth interviews, findings, and the author's own experience working in the field. The study also draws on Gun Free South Africa's (GFSA) materials and research work, and it gives an account of how GFSA personnel, through their personal experience, have been dealing with gun violence cases. The case study captures the subjective, personal perspectives of the participants. The participants gave their input into this paper, which makes it more impactful for the reader, from a personal perspective.

The case study focuses on a specific number of communities and the experiences of a limited number of mothers who lost their children due to gun violence killings, recounting their experience with the resources and tools offered by GFSA. Therefore, the case study might not reflect the experience of thousands of other mothers in South Africa, who have lost a child to such gun violence.

2. Gun Free South Africa

Established in 1995, GFSA's goal is to contribute to building a safe South Africa by reducing gun violence. It is a single-issue campaigning organisation with three decades of experience in public policy advocacy, public education and awareness raising, and community mobilisation. This includes influencing policy and programming to strengthen and monitor the enforcement of the current gun control regime in South Africa; extensive media reach highlighting the risks of guns in the home for women and how to use the law to save lives; and community safety interventions with a specific focus on developing active youth networks to establish gun free zones, building capacity to use media for public education and advocacy, and contributing to a shift in societal attitudes to guns.

A unique feature of the organisation is its ability to navigate and influence policy and programming at the institutional level in South Africa while also being able to facilitate and support community mobilisation to influence and shape policy and legislative processes at both the local and national levels. This dual strategy of grassroots mobilisation and influencing public policy is informed by an understanding of the supply and demand dynamics of guns: that the easy supply (which includes insufficient state control of firearms, including their diversion from commercial and civilian holdings), and the high demand from civilians, both contribute to high levels of gun violence.

GFSA is recognised by the authorities, media, and others in South Africa as having a high expertise on firearms control and community mobilisation for safer communities; this includes recognition across the non-governmental - NGO - sector and by the various government departments and agencies in South Africa as well as by UN agencies dealing with small arms violence, like the UN Office on Disarmament Affairs.

As a well-known non-governmental organisation in South Africa that works specifically on reducing gun violence, GFSA also locates itself within the broader violence prevention and social justice arena. For example, GFSA draws on the knowledge and expertise of its strategic partners who work with community members in Gauteng and the Western Cape – provinces where GFSA's fieldworkers are active – to reduce gun violence and help build safer communities. Part of building safer communities is exploring the key factors and consequences of gun violence on communities, especially its impact on mothers who lose children to gun violence. Core issues like the high unemployment rate, poverty, lack of service delivery, distrust in the police and justice system, and using violence as a means of resolving conflict are factors that play a role in why gun violence is prevalent in many communities, like the Cape Flats. The impact of this trauma can be particularly devastating, affecting not only mothers' personal lives but also their relationships and communities.[1]



◄
Gun Free South Africa Team in 2026.
©Sugar Source

1 Factsheet of Gun Violence on the Cape Flats, Parliamentary Research Unit, 2025.

3. Background

South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world – our homicide rate is six times the global average and is facilitated by the proliferation and misuse of firearms, which are the leading weapon used to murder, injure, and threaten. Latest annual crime statistics show that an average of 30 people are shot dead daily in South Africa.[2]

While young men are the most likely victims and perpetrators of gun violence, children are also affected. Hospital admission data since the removal of the apartheid government show how vulnerable they are to being shot in crossfire: Between 1991 and 2010, 467 children under the age of 12 were admitted to a Cape Town children's hospital (which treats children 12 years and under) after being shot. 43% were victims of crossfire, 14% were victims of accidental shooting, 9% were adults deliberately shot, and 5% were gangsters shot. Research undertaken at this hospital shows that between 2000 and 2010, South Africa's Firearms Control Act, which was phased in over four years after being passed into law in 2000, helped protect children from gunshot wounds.[3]

A study done by The Lancet Regional Health Commission presented the estimated number of child homicides among children aged 0-17 years in South Africa for each study year, with an estimated 1018 children killed in 2009. The number of such cases decreased to 893 children in 2017 and then slightly increased to 948 children in the 2020/2021 study. "It was expected that the decline seen between 2009 and 2017 would continue, but COVID-19 conditions in South Africa likely changed the downward trend when stressors in households were high, contributing to violence against children by parents."[4]

The study also found different patterns between males and females, with a significant decrease among females and no statistically significant increase among males.

"In 2017 and mostly driven by homicide rates of older male children, the overall homicide rate for male children was more than twice the rate for females. Despite existing gun control legislation governed by the Firearms Control Act 60 of 2000, firearm-related deaths among children nearly doubled, with males disproportionately impacted by gunshot wounds (up to 32.3% in 2020). The observed increase in male perpetrators and gun-related murders over time, coupled with the disproportionate impact on older males, emphasizes the need for strict and consistent application of firearm control measures by the South African government. Child homicide studies have consistently identified firearm homicides as a leading and persistent cause of death among older male children."[5]

However, as a result of various failures in firearms management dating from 2011 (described in the box below), gun violence has been steadily increasing in South Africa: Gun-related murders rose from 31% of all murders in 2020 to 44% by 2025.[6]

> "The increased availability and use of guns is one of these factors. Indeed, the trends in firearm-related femicides across the four studies reflect the poor application of the country's Firearm Control legislation. The initial decline between 1999 and 2009 coincided with the implementation of the South African Firearm Control Act of 2000; however, increased firearm availability due to mismanagement, fraud, and police corruption drove an upward trend after 2009. Between November 2010 and July 2011, the police fast-tracked a backlog of more than a million firearm-related applications for firearm licences, licence renewals for individuals, and competency certificates. New processes to fast-track firearm licence applications within 90 days (a requirement not contained in the FCA) were

2 South Africa Police Service national crime statistics.

3 Campbell, Nathan, G. Colville, Y. van der Heyde, and A.B. van As. (2013). Firearm injuries to children in Cape Town, South Africa: Impact of the 2004 Firearms Control Act. South African Journal of Surgery, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 92-96.

4 Chirwa E, Dekel B, Mhlongo S et al. Trends in child homicides in South Africa: evidence from three national surveys: 2009, 2017, and 2020/2021. The Lancet Regional Health – Africa, 2026; 7.

5 Ibid.

6 South Africa Police Service national quarterly crime statistics.

also introduced. Speeding up processes in this way may have heightened the risk of people who were not 'fit and proper' persons being granted licences. Extensive delays in digitising the system, coupled with poor record-keeping, have made it difficult to track firearm ownership effectively, or monitor the movement of firearms between the legal and illegal sectors through loss or theft. Disconcertingly, the police are themselves unable to adequately account for the whereabouts of their own firearms. Thus, what ought to have been the nerve centre of the FCA's regulatory system – the CFR [Central Firearms Registry] – is instead a site of disorder rather than control. Corruption has found fertile ground in this obscure environment and allowed for a dangerous convergence of police and organised crime around firearms."[7]

South Africa's gun control policy and legislation

After the introduction of stronger gun laws in South Africa in 2000, there was a significant drop in the country's gun-related deaths: from 34-gun deaths a day in 1998 to 18 a day in 2009.

The Firearms Control Act (FCA) governs everything about guns in South Africa. It was signed into law in 2000 and replaced the old Arms and Ammunition Act of 1969. The Firearms Control Act 60 of 2000 (FCA) primarily regulates the possession and use of firearms by civilians and private security companies within South Africa. While it establishes strict licencing requirements for individuals, it exempts the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), South African Police Service (SAPS), and Correctional Services from many of its licencing provisions. These state entities remain governed by the Act regarding safety, storage, and reporting requirements.

The FCA features important principles such as: gun ownership is not a right but a privilege; the age limit for gun ownership is 21 years; the number of firearms for self-defence is limited to one handgun or shotgun per person; a gun licence can only be issued after the applicant has passed tests to qualify for a competency certificate; public spaces, like schools, can be declared as Firearm Free Zones; and gun owners must renew their gun licences regularly to make sure that they remain 'fit and proper' to own the gun and that the firearm has not been lost, stolen, or illegally traded.

Despite this great progress, gun violence started rising again in 2011, due to poor management of firearms, fraud, and corruption by the police. Corruption in the gun-licencing process includes police officials being bribed to award gun licences to individuals who are not fit for gun ownership or being pressured to meet performance targets by fast-tracking applications without following due process to deal with the backlog of licence applications.

Poor compliance by gun owners has also undermined the effectiveness of the FCA in reducing gun violence. For instance, thousands of gun owners have not complied with a 2018 Constitutional Court ruling that affirms the importance of regular firearm renewal. As a result, over 450,000 guns are estimated to be in unlawful civilian possession, which undermines SA's firearms control management system.

Most illegal guns in South Africa are domestically sourced and were legally owned before leaking into the illegal pool. Both legal and illegal guns are used in crimes and given that the Firearms Control Act is not properly enforced, the ongoing danger is that unfit and

7 Losing liberty and life: The impact of firearms on domestic violence in SA; Vetten, L. 2025. This report was undertaken in partnership with Gun Free SA, MOSAIC, the National Shelter Movement of South Africa and the Cape Town office of the Heinrich Boll Foundation.

high-risk people are granted licences. Poor enforcement ultimately leads to illegal guns ending up being traded back on the street and in the hands of people who are not fit to handle or own them. For example, problems in the police service's management of firearms allow guns in police custody to be stolen and sold. In one of the biggest scandals of such trafficking, a police colonel named Christiaan Prinsloo and his accomplices stole 2,400 guns from police stores that were meant to be destroyed and sold them to gangs in the Western Cape. This scandal of gun diversion is known as the Prinsloo case.

4. Context: Gun violence in South Africa

South Africa has inherited a 'culture of violence' from its colonial and apartheid past. In the run-up to the 1994 democratic elections, over 3.5 million licensed firearms were in the hands of 2.4 million individuals. At that time, gun ownership was governed by the Arms and Ammunition Act of 1969, which set the age limit for gun ownership at 16, allowed people to own up to 12 guns, and issued gun licences for life.

In 1994, 31 people were shot and killed each day; this figure rose to 34 a day in 1998, which is when the government started taking action to tighten gun control in South Africa.[8]

The call for a gun-free South Africa was about embracing and building a peaceful democracy—it recognised the impact of historical violence, including colonialism and apartheid, as well as the lived reality of high levels of violence during the negotiations to end apartheid rule. It was also about expressing hope for the future. The experience of living in a violent society and civil society activism to promote justice, human rights, and the rule of law influenced GFSA's understanding of the nature of armed violence, its impact on society, and the need to explore factors that play a role in why South Africa suffers from gun violence in the first place.[9]

Gun Free South Africa (GFSA) has collaborated with moms from the Western Cape, specifically Atlantis, Mitchell's Plain, as well as Westbury in Gauteng, exploring the mothers' experience, emotions, and coping mechanisms in the aftermath of their loss. This case study helps examine the social and community responses to such tragedies, and it identifies potential support systems and interventions that can help mothers cope with their loss.

4.1. Meet the mothers

Below, we share the stories of six mothers who have lost children to gun violence. Each story is a testament to the enduring power of love, resilience, and advocacy. These mothers have bravely shared their experiences, hoping that their stories will raise awareness, promote understanding, and inspire change.

8 Gun-related femicide: Abrahams N, Chirwa E, Mhlongo S, et al. 2025. Two decades of tracking femicide in South Africa: An analysis of four national surveys from 1999 to 2020/2021, Global Public Health, 20:1, 2576753, DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2025.

9 Kirsten, A (2008). Gun Free South Africa: A Nation Without Guns?

Mothers' stories

Jane Douglas




Jane Douglas' graduation as GBV ambassador in Atlantis in 2025, Western Cape. (left) Lizario Douglas, Jane Douglas' son. (right) ©Jane Douglas

On the 18 September 2021, Lizario Douglas, the 24-year-old son of Jane Douglas, was fatally shot in Atlantis, a small town outside Cape Town, South Africa. Lizario had friends who were involved in gangs and was mistaken for one of them. He was on his way to a friend's house and was shot by four gang members just a few meters from his destination. Jane had been on her way home from the shopping centre that Saturday morning when she received a call from Lizario's girlfriend to say that he had been shot. When she arrived, she recognised her son by his pants, cap, and t-shirt; he was dead by the time she reached him. "I fell to the floor, and the only thing I could do was scream and shout," Jane explained. Besides helping GFSA advocate for stronger gun laws, Jane is currently part of the Gender-based Violence Ambassadors' programme in Atlantis, under the local Department of Social Development. Jane attends many meetings and skill development training offered by the government, so she can better advocate for children who are struggling, and she shares her love for making food with the community children in her area.

Sumiera Daniels

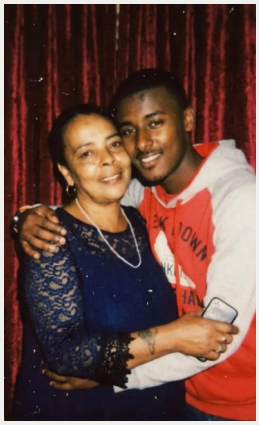


Sumiera Daniels with her son Mogamat Daniels. ©Sumiera Daniels

Sumiera lost her 17-year-old son, Moegamat Daniels on the 28 March 2021. Moegamat was on his way to the shop when he was shot by a stray bullet during a gang-related shoot-out. To this day, no suspects have been arrested, and no witnesses have been questioned. "I feel despondent because of the lack of communication from detectives assigned to my case, who never have answers for me. This makes me feel hopeless and helpless, I cannot even bring myself to go through trauma counselling," Sumiera explained. Sumiera still lives in the house a few meters from where her son was shot and killed, having to relive the day of losing her son every day. She is a mother to her nine-year-old daughter and still looks after her mother. Sumiera supports other women at court and can answer court process questions because of the knowledge she gained from working with GFSA.

Emily Pylman

Emily lost her son, Brently, on the 12 December 2016. She never received a case number for his death, and it was only five years later, in 2021, that she was visited by a detective for the first time. Brently sustained three bullet wounds in an attack in which 27 shots were fired at him, no one was arrested for his death. "I was in bed when I heard the news. When a friend called me, I blacked out and didn't know what to do. Knowing that the suspects ran past me as I walked to the scene still haunts me," Emily said. The case is at inquest court, yet Emily still has not received any communication from anyone. She believes no proper investigation was done, given the complete lack of communication from the local police. Emily is currently studying Finance Management at the local college in Atlantis, hoping to work in the finance department for GFSA.



Emily Pylman with her son Brently.
©Emily Pylman

Melanie Kiel

Melanie's son, Dudley Richards, was 17 years old when he was fatally shot in Karoopoort Street in Tafelsig on 2 December 2013. Dudley was visiting a friend for the night, and on his way back home, both he and his friend were shot. "When I arrived at the scene, I could feel his body was still warm. I kissed him on his cheek, and he died shortly after. Thirteen years after his death, I still shake at the sound of gunshots," said Melanie. She is among the nine individuals who are part of the Prinsloo Guns class action lawsuit GFSA has instituted against the Minister of Police (see below). This is what Melanie added: "to make sure that the state is held accountable for the lives lost, and that no other families go through the same thing."



Melanie Kiel.
©Melanie Kiel

Joyce Volker

Joyce (69) lost her son Cheslyn Chaplan (36) after he was shot twice in Maboneng, Johannesburg. Cheslyn was hanging out with his friends on 25 February 2024 when he was killed. Two suspects were identified but never arrested; they were subsequently reported to have been shot and killed in 2025. Cheslyn was a twin and had worked as a mechanic before he was killed. "We live in fear every day, and I am reminded of my son's death every day when the gunshots go off in the community," Joyce explained. She is part of the *Women in Victory* support group in her community, learning new skills and keeping busy in the chaos they endure every day.

Priscilla Adams

For many around the world, New Year's Day is spent with family and friends, reflecting on the past year and getting ready for the new possibilities that lie ahead. Yet, for 57-year-old Priscilla, it is a day of loss and profound sadness. Priscilla lost her son, Shafik Adams (35), early in the morning on New Year's Day 2025. Shafik was shot nine times in his legs, chest, and head. She explained, "4 am on New Year's Day was the last time I spoke to him. He was full of love, always brought me flowers, and loved cooking food. Witnesses do not want to talk; there is no evidence, no suspects, and no communication from the investigating officer. Until today, I cannot walk down the street where my son was shot and killed; it still shakes me." Priscilla also joined the *Women in Victory* support group and is currently receiving counselling for the loss she bears every day.



Priscilla Adams at the mothers' indaba in Westbury in August 2026. ©Gauteng Provincial Legislature

These stories humanise the statistics and headlines, putting a face to the tragedy and gun violence. By sharing these mothers' experiences GFSA hopes to highlight the impact of gun violence on families and communities, foster empathy and understanding for those affected by gun violence and encourage readers to take action and advocate for policies that prevent gun violence.[10]

4.2. Impact of gun violence on communities and mothers

To truly understand why mothers lose children to gun violence in the first place, one must understand the core issues children face in violence-infested communities.

South African youth are disproportionately exposed to high levels of violence in their homes, such as abuse against them or relatives, coercive control, and neglect; violence in schools, like bullying and peer pressure, and violence in their communities that includes substance abuse and gang violence. With many experiencing multiple traumas as both victims and witnesses, the absence of supportive family structures further exacerbates this issue, leading some young people to seek alternative support systems, such as gangs. Young men see gang membership at the local level as a rite of passage into manhood – see the box below for more information on gangsterism.[11]

Gangsterism

Criminal gangs that commit petty crime and serious crime, including violence with weapons, often serve as a surrogate family for young men lacking positive parental attachments, particularly in communities with limited opportunities and resources. Criminal gangs are typically characterised by a common identity, name, or identifier and are often linked to drug activity. Criminal gang members are more likely to have dropped out of school early and are drawn to illegal guns as a means of asserting power and control.

The recruitment of young boys into gangs is often facilitated by their vulnerability and the promise of material rewards. Criminal gang leaders, who frequently embody a charismatic and powerful image, serve as attractive role models for children and youth lacking positive

10 Some of the mothers did not respond well to the idea of looking through old pictures of their sons and sharing it.

11 Gangsterism: Pinnock D. 2016. Gang Town. Cape Town: Tafelberg. How bad is organized crime in South Africa? Global Initiative against transnational organized crime. 2025.

influences in their lives. These leaders offer a sense of belonging and importance, drawing young boys into gang activities.

Factors that contribute to gang recruitment include the fact that young boys are targeted due to their age and vulnerability, as well as the leniency of the juvenile justice system. Other factors are materiial rewards - the promise of financial gain, luxury items, and social status is enticing to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds – as well as the lack of positive role models. The absence of positive influences in their lives makes young boys more susceptible to gang leaders who offer a sense of belonging and importance.

Once these young boys are part of a gang, it is often difficult to leave. Gang members may have committed crimes or witnessed gang activities, making them a potential threat to the gang if they attempt to leave. Criminal gangs also often use debt and loyalty as means of controlling their members, making it difficult for them to leave the gang. And the identity and belonging young boys experience being in a gang make it challenging for them to sever ties.

High unemployment and poverty in marginalised areas allow gangs to fill the role of community "providers" and employers, establishing control through intimidation and reliance.

Organised crime in South Africa is heavily driven by, and linked to, violent street gangs and prison-based gangs, particularly in the Western Cape, which acts as a major hub for drugs, extortion, and specialised crime.

Organised crime in South Africa is a severe, growing crisis, with the country ranking among the top 10 globally and second in Africa for criminality. High-level organised crime networks are active in South Africa, as evidenced by various official commissions of inquiry and police reports, and at times those networks use gangs and corrupt practices of officials to pursue their aims, as is shown by the extensive gun trafficking network under Colonel Prinsloo - see below.

These findings highlight the complex factors contributing to youth involvement in gangs. Effective prevention and intervention strategies must address these underlying issues and provide alternative support systems and opportunities for young people to thrive.

The basic impact of gun violence on mothers is that mothers are forced to navigate a society where violence is pervasive, and the systems meant to protect them, and their children often fall short. The impact of gun violence also extends beyond individual families, affecting entire communities, particularly those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with high rates of unemployment, poverty, and crime. The impact of gun violence varies from person to person; there is no one way to respond.

However, mothers exposed to violence in their neighbourhoods are at a higher risk of depression: “We find that mothers who witness at least one shooting in their neighbourhoods or local communities exhibit more symptoms of depression and are 32–60% more likely to meet the criteria for depression than mothers who do not witness a shooting. We also find that witnessing a shooting is associated with increases in parental aggravation, which is partially mediated by maternal depression. This and other previously documented spillover effects on the mental health of mothers also impacts on children and family members; these findings have important implications for mothers’ well-being and other family members.”[12] Some mothers' loss of a child to gun violence can lead them to become powerful advocates for change in the public sphere.

12 Leibbrand, C., Rivara, F., & Rowhani-Rahbar, A. (2021). Gun Violence Exposure and Experiences of Depression Among Mothers. Prev Sci 22, 523–533. Gun Free South Africa Safety Toolkit, Module 4: Youth and guns.

5. Challenges

5.1. Mothers and the justice system

The challenges of working with mothers who have lost children to gun violence are complicated but change over time. Working with the local police station contributes to the challenges of keeping the mothers motivated to continue with their cases and receiving trauma counselling. Working with mothers who have lost children to gun violence involves navigating intense, complex trauma, often compounded by a lack of resources, systemic neglect, and profound, long-lasting grief.

Some mothers, supported by GFSA, live with "open cases" that they are told are being investigated, but do not reach a conclusion where a prosecution can begin to get justice for their children, and they must walk past their child's killer. Besides, nothing is being done by the investigating officers assigned to their case, or at least it feels like they are not doing anything because of the lack of communication between the police and the mothers. Most of these cases were also closed by the investigating authorities because of a lack of evidence, the absence of witnesses, and the fact that no one can be traced to the murder weapon, which adds to distrust in the police and justice system. Mothers feel despondent and feel the justice system is failing them. As one of the mothers, Emily Pylman, said, "How do we help other mothers if the detectives are not doing their jobs?".[13]

5.2. Mothers and their trauma

Key challenges include managing the "silent" aftermath of trauma, addressing social isolation/stigma, and providing consistent, long-term psycho-social support. Before the initial support group started, mothers felt isolated and blamed, particularly in communities where the violence is misunderstood. As a result, the mothers are hesitant to join support groups, and if they do, they are hesitant to speak up in those groups.

Most times, the mothers know their child's killer because the perpetrator is a neighbour and even a family friend, but the mother cannot say anything because she might be in danger of retribution. One consequence of this is that mothers do not trust telling their stories in support groups because it might cause conflict. So, it holds mothers back from receiving any kind of counselling services, especially when the dialogue is group-facilitated, where a neutral third party guides a group to communicate and tell their stories of managing grief.

GFSA had to learn and adjust to the observations and the feedback received from the mothers, and we closed the group sessions to work with the mothers individually. The group sessions continued with grief counselling that focused more on helping the mothers to manage triggers of grief, reduce impairment in daily functioning, and find a new sense of "normal". GFSA worked with the mothers individually on their sons' cases, instead of discussing them in a group setting. GFSA has tried doing individual counselling but requires sustainable funding in the long-term.

5.3. Law enforcement and local communities

A comprehensive, coherent legal framework is essential to reduce gun availability, thereby reducing gun-related deaths. Poor enforcement of the law, including corrupt practices, contributes to increases in gun deaths. South Africa's experience of implementing the Firearms Control Act (FCA) bears this out. The current context provides sufficient evidence that the entire firearms control regime is ineffective and requires several interventions.[14]

It is frequently reported by the media and businesses, as well as by senior officials and police officers, that there is a lack of trust in the police system in South Africa because of corruption, firearms getting leaked to gangs, and cases being closed without proper investigation. Corruption is the reason why many community members do not trust the police. The Prinsloo case is an example of this.

As recently as September 2025, a Commission of Inquiry was established that has been exposing

13 Mothers from Atlantis gave input on the challenges they observed and experienced being part of this movement.

14 Taylor C. 2019. Gun control & violence: South Africa's story. Johannesburg: Gun Free South Africa.

the police's relationship with organised crime. The Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference, and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System – informally known as the Madlanga Commission – started its hearings on Wednesday, 17 September 2025. President Cyril Ramaphosa established the Commission as a response to allegations, made on 6 July 2025 by KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) police commissioner Lieutenant-General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, that South Africa's criminal justice system was compromised because of the infiltration of criminal syndicates into police, judicial, parliamentary, political, intelligence, and law enforcement structures.

The Commission of Inquiry showed that the "larger tragedy is not only what has happened inside the justice system, but what has happened to public trust. South Africans increasingly feel they cannot rely on the police to investigate crimes impartially, on prosecutors to pursue cases effectively, or on intelligence structures to operate independently. When trust erodes, communities turn to parallel systems: private security, including acquiring guns for protection, informal justice, and political muscle, which accelerates institutional decline."[15] This context highlights the challenges the mothers deal with daily, when they hear nothing from their investigating officers for years, and at the end of the day, get no justice for the death of their children.

In February 2026, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to the Western Cape, specifically the Cape Flats, to support police in combating surging gang violence and protecting communities. Soldiers have been deployed to act as a force multiplier, assisting in operations against criminal networks, and the deployment is intended as a temporary measure.

From previous experiences, using violence to reduce or stop violence never works, there is always the risk of violent confrontation and a concern for the risk of police brutality.[16] A journalist quoted Irvin Kinnes, an associate professor with the University of Cape Town's Centre for Criminology. "It's a very dangerous thing to bring the army because there's an impatience with the fact that the police are not doing their job. And so, they come in with that mentality and want to beat up everybody and break people's bones," Kinnes said. "We saw what happened in COVID. They killed people like the army. It's not as if the police don't kill people, but the point is, you don't need the army to do that."[17]

According to international standards of policing, police and certain other officials with powers of law enforcement must sometimes be permitted to use force or lethal force to do their job of keeping communities safe and protecting people from life-threatening attacks. The use of intentional lethal force, whether using firearms or other means, is permitted solely when strictly necessary to protect life and only when less extreme measures are insufficient to restrain or apprehend the suspected offender. In law enforcement, this is the principle of 'absolute necessity' which, unlike the law of armed conflict, restricts force to a last resort and requires maximum restraint to respect and preserve human life.

Building trust between law enforcement and the community is essential. Community members tend to know what the community needs and identify the issues they have to deal with, while law enforcement agencies have the resources, or are supposed to have them, to prevent and combat crime and violence. If they cooperate in mutual respect, the two sets of actors have the potential to implement effective strategies to reduce and prevent gang violence and crime.



◄ **Police in Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa. ©Flickr, Babak Fakhamzadeh, CC BY-NC 2.0**

15 Corruption Watch, The Madlanga commission's first week: a brief summary, September 2025. eNCA, South Africa Explained | Inside the Madlanga Commission: How South Africa's crime-fighting machinery fell apart, 15 Dec, 2025.

16 Wood, B., "International Standards to Prevent Police Gun Violence", September 2023.

17 Wanneburg, G., 27 February 2026, Aljazeera, 'A dangerous thing': South Africa's gang-ridden townships fear army deployment.

6. Gun Free South Africa's work: GFSA support systems and experience with mothers

6.1. This author's experience

GFSA's first approach to working with mothers of murdered children was exploratory: it was deliberately slow but flexible. It started on Mother's Day 2021, not knowing where this movement would take us. After this author experienced the profound loss of my mother in 2018, I found it challenging to face Mother's Day, a day that once brought joy but now served as a painful reminder of my loss. Instead of hiding away, I chose to channel my grief into a meaningful endeavour. I envisioned a gathering of mothers who had lost children to gun violence, a space where they could come together to celebrate their children's lives, share their stories, and find solace in each other's company.

GFSA invited as many mothers as possible from Atlantis who had experienced the loss of a child to an initial meeting, and five mothers showed up. I remember two moms who had been invited calling me to explain that they were not ready to talk about their loss, that they couldn't even visit the graves of their children. One of these moms lost her son almost ten years ago, at the time, and it still haunts her.

Although our first group was small, this intimacy helped build trust. Difficult and sad conversations were had, but the experience sparked a sense of purpose, allowing me and the moms to begin to transform grief into a positive force with the help of GFSA's resources. By creating a platform for these mothers to connect, we aimed to provide a supportive community where they could honour their children's memories, begin to heal, find a sense of purpose, and work together to create a safer future for the community.

During this initial gathering, the mothers mentioned that they had not received any trauma support. In South Africa, the South African Police Service (SAPS) facilitates access to support services for victims of crime, including, but not limited to, trauma counselling and debriefing.[18]

Many of the mothers have been left for years with unresolved "open case dockets" on their murdered sons. This means that the case is still actively being investigated to identify suspects or gather more evidence. Most of these mothers do not even have case numbers, a number that is essential for tracking investigations and accessing records, which indicated to us that no investigations had been conducted by SAPS. In many cases, this is how mothers usually give up and do not seek any further information on their sons' cases, mostly because they do not know how to take it further, because there is no communication from detectives on their cases, leading to distrust of the police and justice system.



▲ **Monique Hansen. ©Surefire Communications**

6.2. Gun Free South Africa's approach

GFSA's approach and goal started to become clear: to build a vibrant, independent movement of mothers who have lost loved ones to gun-related violence, using storytelling and knowledge sharing to facilitate healing and hold the state to account.

Since then, GFSA has been working with ten mothers in Atlantis through information sharing and working with their investigating officers, officially since January 2022. Since 2024, GFSA has added the local community of Westbury in Johannesburg to the mothers' movement as well, another community infested with gun violence.

18 Victim empowerment in the South African Police Service.

The last four years have allowed the organisation to collect information from the mothers through healing dialogues and one-on-one engagements with the mothers to work on their cases with the detective commander of the local police station. The mothers have gone through multiple sessions of psychosocial support and activism training on how to influence policymakers and educate communities about the risk of guns.

Seven women from Atlantis who lost sons to gun violence submitted affidavits to the national Police Inspectorate regarding the lack of progress on their open case dockets. In collaboration with former Major-General Jeremy Veary, we were able to connect with the department to further our work with the mothers in Atlantis. As a result, the Inspectorate investigated each complaint, took statements from the Investigating Officer and the complainant, and submitted these reports to Police Headquarters. In some instances, disciplinary action was recommended, inquests were instituted, and in one instance, the case was brought to court, with sentencing pending. GFSA has not received any feedback from the head offices, but the feedback from the local police station was that "Gun Free is forcing us to do our work." As communication became better, the Atlantis station commander became more involved and would sit in on meetings to answer questions from the mothers. Now the women continue to meet with and put pressure on their local police station to provide progress on their cases.

The goal for the mothers' movement was clear – for mothers to not only heal, but to be empowered to use their experience and personal stories of loss to advocate for stricter gun laws, increased police accountability, and community safety measures.



◀ **Healing dialogue session in collaboration with Alcardo Andrews Foundation who facilitated the healing dialogues and still supports the Atlantis mothers indirectly. ©Alcardo Andrews Foundation**

6.3. Impact of the campaign on the mothers

The impact of this campaign might not be visible externally, but internal changes have been observed. Like many of the mothers that GFSA has worked with, they could not tell their stories of loss without crying, but now, they can speak up, tell their stories, and advocate for other mothers. There is a sense of confidence that they gained through this experience of confronting their investigating officers, sitting in court, and gaining knowledge of the police and justice system. Once they started knowing their rights, they were unstoppable.

Another positive impact from GFSA's approach is the sense of empowerment and even closure that comes from receiving even small pieces of information about their sons' cases. After months, even years, following their son's death, mothers usually hear nothing from the investigating officers – not why their son was killed, nor who killed them. The mothers find it very difficult to get over their loss without information, so even just receiving their son's case number brings some sense of understanding.

Words from the mothers

“It took me out of a silence zone – I was usually in my own business, and never really was interested in what was happening in the community until this support group. What I learned was that I am not alone, and losing my son through gun violence might have been something new to me, but so many other mothers have their own stories, and when you listen to their stories, you cannot help but be there for others, and want to fight for them as well.” – Emily Pylman.

“I was already working in the community, through my feeding scheme and after-care for children. After losing my son and joining this movement, I became more interested in wanting to help kids in the community. Being in the community meetings and belonging to a group like this helped me with my healing process. Before this movement, I had a great fear of the gun violence happening in the community and the violence happening around the world. But now I feel I am over the fear, and I can be there for others experiencing the same thing.” - Jane Douglas.

In addition to the approach of working with mothers who have lost children to gun violence, GFSA has been working with six families in the Cape Flats under the Prinsloo Guns Class Action, a case involving the trafficking of firearms from state armouries by high-level organised crime networks (see box below).

The Cape Flats is an expansive, low-lying, flat region southeast of Cape Town's city centre, known for its rich, complex culture and history. Historically, it served as a major area for forced removals of "non-white" residents under apartheid. Today, it is a densely populated area featuring vibrant communities, townships, and informal settlements alongside significant challenges with poverty, unemployment, and gang violence.

GFSA’s Prinsloo Guns Class Action

In 2013, the South African Police Service (SAPS) began recovering an excessive number of guns on the Cape Flats that had been professionally ‘cleaned’ of identifying marks – proof that a sophisticated gun smuggling syndicate was at work.

To track the supplier, two senior police officials, Major-Generals Peter Jacobs and Jeremy Vearey, registered Project Impi in December 2013. Their investigation led to the arrest in 2015 of a senior SAPS member, Colonel Christiaan Prinsloo, the Gauteng provincial commander of Firearms, Liquor and Second-Hand Goods, and a respected “firearms guru”.

Prinsloo confessed to working with another police officer, Colonel David Naidoo, an operational officer in the Confiscated Firearms Store at Silverton in Pretoria, to smuggle guns that had been confiscated by or surrendered to the police for destruction to gang leaders on the Cape Flats. Prinsloo entered a plea bargain with the State, providing detailed information on the syndicate in return for a lesser sentence.

Two of Prinsloo's alleged accomplices – Alan Raves (a collector and firearms dealer) and Irshaad Laher (a businessman who was allegedly selling stolen guns to gang leaders) – are currently facing charges. Despite this development, the effectiveness of Project Impi in prosecuting those responsible and addressing structural weaknesses that allowed (and continue to allow) guns to leak from the police to criminals has been severely hampered by the state. For instance, after Project Impi received an affidavit in 2016 implicating then-President Jacob Zuma in state capture, efforts to shut the 'guns to gangs' syndicate were themselves shut down, and instead of being recognised for their work, Jacobs and Vearey were demoted, and Project Impi was stopped.

A total of 888 of the guns stolen by Prinsloo and Naidoo have been forensically linked to 1,066 murders in the Western Cape that were perpetrated between February 2010 and 5 June 2016. Prosecutors found that 187 children between the ages of one and 17 years old were shot between February 2010 and December 2015 with Prinsloo Guns, 67 of whom were killed, and of the more than 2000 guns that Prinsloo admitted to stealing, more than 1,000 are still missing.

GFSA, working with a coalition of partners, has applied to the Western Cape High Court for the certification of class action proceedings against the Minister of Police, National Police Commissioner, and Provincial Police Commissioners to claim damages associated with deaths and injuries resulting from the actions of Prinsloo and Naidoo, who coordinated the sale of guns in police stores to gangs.

GFSA's certification application has been made on behalf of families affected by the Prinsloo Guns – that is, anyone who suffered damages because of being shot with a Prinsloo Gun or anyone who suffered damages because of their loved one being shot with a Prinsloo Gun. This includes children who were shot and injured, parents or guardians of children who were shot and killed, adults who were shot and injured or dependents of adults who were shot and killed. In addition to claiming for damages, GFSA is also looking at ways to address failures in SAPS' firearms and ammunition management system, which allowed Prinsloo, Naidoo, and others to leak guns from police stores, undetected, for years.

GFSA has been supporting these families, including holding the state to account and getting justice for the people whose lives have been affected by guns stolen from police stores and sold to gang leaders by a former senior police officer, Christiaan Prinsloo. GFSA provides support to these families through legal services, psycho-social support, holding memorial services, and providing opportunities for skills training, aimed at fostering long-term healing, resilience and recovery.

The link between the Class Action families and the mothers' movement are that both groups have been failed by a justice and security system that is supposed to protect them, and both groups represent families devastated by gun violence. While the class action focuses on the source of the weapons, the mothers' groups highlight the subsequent failure of the justice system, including "open case dockets" remaining unresolved for years. Both initiatives provide a platform for survivors to move from "victims of tragedy" to "changemakers". Mothers' support groups also offer a space for shared grieving and collective action against the stigma often associated with gun-related deaths. This stigma takes several forms: Because gun violence is so prevalent in South Africa, with an average of 30 people shot and killed daily, there is a widespread desensitisation to these deaths. This creates a "stigma of inevitability," where communities are sometimes expected to accept violent loss as part of life. Compounding this is the assumption that every child who dies from gun violence was part of a gang, that their death was, in some sense, deserved: "'you live by the gun, you die by the gun."

Recommendations and opportunities

The experiences of mothers who have lost children to gun violence highlight the need for comprehensive support and resources. Based on their stories, and the work GFSA does with the mothers in the three different communities we covered in the case study, we hope that other non-governmental organisations doing similar work can use this report and its recommendations as opportunities to better support grieving mothers, advocate for policies that addresses the root causes of gun violence and empower such mothers to take on leadership roles in their communities.

Dealing with the trauma that mothers bear after the loss of their child, especially through gun violence, is something no one can fully understand, including mothers who have lost children to gun violence, as each person's experience is unique, but we can help prevent other mothers from going through the same thing.

Such work takes time and a lot of resources. In the short term, there are things that can be done, which GFSA is already engaged in with the local communities in both Gauteng and the Western Cape.

GFSA has two main goals to achieve its vision of making South Africa safer by reducing gun violence. Firstly, GFSA advocates for a strong and effective small arms control regime in SA: this includes engaging with the Minister of Police to develop a strategy to prioritise the adoption of measures that address and prevent gun-related crime and violence. These measures should include strengthening SA's firearms and ammunition management system; advocating for an amendment to the Firearms Control Act to be passed into law so that it closes loopholes from being exploited by unscrupulous dealers, corrupt officials and irresponsible civilians who accumulate firearms and ammunition. For example, the measures should stop gangs from registering as sports shooters and private security companies as a method to accumulate firearms.[19] And then, GFSA's advocacy for stronger gun laws, could also hold the state to account for its failure to secure weapons and ammunition under its control through GFSA's class action lawsuit.

Secondly, GFSA seeks to mobilise grassroots communities against gun-related violence and crime. This includes strengthening the capacity of young men and women to take the lead in community safety initiatives, such as the Gun Free Zones project. That project aims to help empower communities to (i) define their safety needs and standards; (ii) develop strong partnerships with stakeholders across various sectors that share a vision of a safer society, free from the fear of gun violence; (iii) mobilise support for the Amendment Bill to be adopted by parliament; (iv) empower victims' families to engage the local police to solve their open case dockets; and (v) help grow a coherent and united voice against gun violence: Many voices, one message.

To achieve these two goals, GFSA undertakes a dual "top-down, bottom-up" approach: lobbying at a policy level to strengthen community safety initiatives, whilst also mobilising communities to create safe spaces, tighten gun controls and implement the law, empower people to use the law, and facilitate platforms to talk about social pressures that drive demand for firearms.

Other interventions that GFSA has included in its work to empower mothers and communities are described below. GFSA provides practical skills and knowledge for communities to use their rights in dealing with the justice system, and to help create safer spaces to reduce gun violence.



◄ **Gun Free Zone implementation at a daycare in Mitchell's Plain. ©Gun Free South Africa**

19 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime: Western Cape Gang Monitor, September 2025.

Prevention and early intervention

Mothers

GFSA's work with mothers covers four interventions:

- **Grief counselling:** Many people in under-resourced communities cannot afford to access mental health and grief counselling services and need the support of local police stations through their Victim Support Room. GFSA contracted a social worker who helps the mothers through their grief and builds resilience.

- **Support groups:** GFSA facilitates support groups to connect the mother with others who have experienced similar trauma. The healing dialogues often provide spaces for mothers to grieve openly, which they struggle to do at home, where they are often required to be strong and be a support for others in the home.

- **Case Management:** GFSA works with the local police station and the mothers on their cases to help the mothers navigate the criminal justice system and access resources and services. The local police play a crucial role in providing case management services, as they are the ones working and investigating these cases.

- **Advocacy:** Through counselling and education, mothers feel more empowered to take on fighting for justice for their sons' cases because they know their rights, particularly in the context of the justice system and other institutions, and can help other mothers navigate this.

Youth

Dealing with the risk factors that make children and youth vulnerable to violence and gun-related violence takes time and a lot of resources. In the short term, two key measures can be taken to immediately save lives: reduce access to guns and alcohol.

- **Firearms:** Two interventions are required by the national authorities to reduce access to guns. First are intelligence-led operations by fully trained and strictly accountable law enforcement agencies to recover illegal guns already circulating in communities, tracing them to the source (as most illegal guns in South Africa originate from legal sources) to close leakage loopholes and destroy recovered guns. However, to stop the tap of leaking guns into the illegal pool, the government needs to go upstream to tighten controls over the acquisition and sale of legal guns. This includes fixing South Africa's Central Firearms Registry, implementing the Firearms Control Act (such as bringing the 450,000 civilian gun owners with expired licences back into the system by way of an amnesty), and amending the Act to address loopholes and align it with global protocols and evidence.

- **Alcohol:** Access to alcohol needs to be limited, because we have observed that excessive alcohol leads to violent behaviour. In addition to implementing existing alcohol laws, these need to be strengthened by the authorities to further limit alcohol availability. Concerning guns and alcohol, GFSA works directly with taverns in making them Gun Free Zones, creating platforms to reach a wider and different community in creating awareness around the risks of guns, and in the process, creating a safe space for people to gather.

- **Social programmes:** Such programmes give young people an alternative to joining gangs and other unhealthy activities. Alternatives should be made available by the authorities as well as by civil society that uplift, empower, and create opportunities for better circumstances. GFSA collaborates with many youth organisations that help young people build the necessary skills that enhance their chances for job opportunities and develop the creative abilities that steer them away from what they think gangsterism can offer them. GFSA also implements initiatives to teach young people skills to deal with conflict in a nonviolent way through community dialogues, where we gather information on the issues communities face, and we facilitate solutions together that work for a specific community.



▲ **Youth dialogue during International Peace Day in partnership with Atlantis Police Station in Atlantis Western Cape. ©Gun Free South Africa**

Gender-focused initiatives

Men's dialogues

While most men are not violent, individual men and groups of men account for 80% of murder victims and perpetrators globally. Statistically, most gun owners in the world are male, although gun sellers are increasingly targeting women in some countries. Traditionally, a gun has long been a cultural symbol of power, strength, and masculinity. Toxic masculinity often includes violence against women as well as other men and boys. If you are a man, you have a higher chance of being a perpetrator or victim of gun violence. However, other risk factors play a role, like excessive alcohol and drug abuse, a history of abuse as a child, interpersonal relationships, high acceptance of gender inequality, recruitment of boys into criminal gangs and armed groups, and exposure to violent crime, police violence in the community, and armed conflict.

Just as there are risk factors, there are also protective factors that can protect young men against gun violence, such as improving the availability of professional policing, involvement in social activities like sports, commitment to school, developed social skills, such as the ability to resolve conflict without violence, or being able to discuss problems with parents.

The work GFSA does with men, especially young men, mostly focuses on understanding gender roles and creating a different narrative of what a non-violent and non-abusive masculinity can look like in the household, workplace, and at school.

While we have struggled to sustain the men's dialogues due to low attendance and engagement, previous efforts — which included involving community leaders such as pastors, ward councillors and police officers as facilitators — were not sustained. We are learning from this and exploring more effective ways to bring men into the conversation.

Women's self-defence dialogues

Men who are aged between 15 and 29 make up 45% of murder victims in South Africa, while 56% of those accused of murder with a gun are aged between 12 and 24. Figures show that 89% of gun murder victims are boys or men, while women make up 11% of all gun-related murder victims in South Africa.[20]

Most South African women who fall victim to gun violence are killed with a legal gun owned by an intimate partner – a current or former husband, boyfriend, same-sex partner, or rejected would-be lover. This is called intimate femicide.

GFSA hosts women's dialogues to raise awareness of how the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) and Firearms Control Act (FCA) can be used to remove a gun in a domestic violence relationship, in collaboration with local organisations such as Cape Flats Safety Forum in the Western Cape and Masisphephe network in Gauteng. The aim is to build community knowledge and providing community members with the relevant information to act.

Overall, reducing the risks of gun violence and working towards increasing protective factors requires time and resources. It includes initiatives aimed at providing quality education, job creation, and dealing with alcohol and drug abuse. As a short-term solution, we need to limit the number of firearms within a community to lower the deaths caused by violence.

GFSA believes and knows that implementing and enforcing strict gun control laws reduces the availability of illegal firearms as well as illegal gun use. By controlling how many guns (legal and illegal) are on the streets and in the communities, crime will be less violent and deadly. The risk of murders in interpersonal disputes (which is the main motive for murders in South Africa), accidental death, suicide, and murder of partners and family members can be reduced.



▲ **Men's dialogue. ©Gun Free South Africa**

20 Prinsloo M. et al. 2021. The 2nd Injury Mortality Survey: A national study of injury mortality levels and causes in South Africa in 2017. Cape Town: South African Medical Research Council.



▲ **Self-defence class in Atlantis. ©Gun Free South Africa**

Lobbying and advocacy

Over the last 30 years, GFSA has engaged with government, parliament and national authorities through a variety of platforms, shaping policy formulation and practice. This includes GFSA being appointed to the Firearms Policy Review Committee in 1997, collaborating with the police on national firearms amnesties, and more recently, highlighting the significant weaknesses in South Africa's gun control system and documenting the substantial negative impact this is having on women and young people living in marginalised communities. One of the challenges/lessons here is recognising the increasing deficit in the government's capacity to enforce existing laws and thinking about what role citizens can play in helping build a more responsive and capable state and safer society. Mobilising mothers who can be at the forefront of lobbying for stricter gun control is a crucial part of addressing the challenges.

GFSA has been advocating for the Firearms Control Bill (FCAB) to come to Parliament. The Draft Bill is a long document that includes almost 100 proposed changes to the Firearms Control Act, 2000 (FCA). GFSA submitted the amendments, identifying loopholes in the current Act, and has been mobilising communities, like-minded stakeholders, and strategic partners to lobby for a strengthened Bill to be tabled as a priority. Our advocacy policy includes limiting who can own what gun for which purpose, reducing the risk of guns being used in violence against women, reducing the risk of illegal gun use, reducing the risk of legal guns leaking into the illegal pool, and facilitating the enforcement of gun laws. Also, GFSA has been calling for greater accountability on the part of the state agencies concerning their own weapons in their possession and when they are used by providing quarterly reports to parliament on loss, theft, and use of state-owned weapons.

The mothers carry out this work through GFSA's education programmes — by mobilising one another, learning how the justice system works, and understanding how they can advocate for stronger gun laws. The aim is to ensure that the mothers will have a voice in deciding which amendments will help keep children safe from gun violence and

build safer communities. Amendments called for include increasing the age limit for gun accessibility and/or stricter consequences and accountability for corruption in the Central Firearms Registry and in the Police System. These messages from mothers about systemic failures contribute to understanding and preventing guns from falling into the wrong hands, destroying the lives of their children and undermining the future of their communities.

The mothers have learned to ask one critical question: 'WHERE IS THE GUN?' A central part of our education is teaching them to ask the right questions in gun violence cases. Too often, when guns or ammunition are retrieved from a crime scene, no one asks where the firearm came from. From our observations and from the mothers' own cases, firearms are seldom recovered by the police at all. Now, when a firearm is recovered, mothers are asking what happens to it — and how it is being used to help solve their children's murder cases. Why is this important? The mothers are learning what it means to hold police accountable and understand lobbying for stricter gun laws. For example, is the gun law strong enough to require ballistic testing when firearms are retrieved from crime scenes, or for bullets to be traced when they are recovered?



▲ **March against gun violence in Atlantis on International Peace Day. ©Gun Free South Africa**

Concluding remarks

The devastating impact of gun violence on mothers whose children have been murdered is a pressing issue that demands attention and action. Through this case study in South Africa, GFSA has gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of grief, trauma, and resilience that these mothers experience. It showed us that gun violence is a public health crisis as well as a systemic criminal justice system failure that affects not only individuals but entire families and communities.

The murder of a child due to gun violence is a traumatic experience that can have long-lasting effects on a mother's emotional and psychological well-being as well as those of other family members, close friends, and neighbours. A strong support system, including family, friends, and community, is essential for helping these mothers cope with their grief and navigate the healing process.

It has been demonstrated that many of these mothers find solace in advocating for change and working towards preventing future tragedies. This can be a powerful way to honour their child's memory, even though there is so much more to do on the ground to achieve justice and safe communities.

Increased resources and cooperation amongst stakeholders are needed to provide accessible and culturally sensitive support services, including counselling and peer support groups, especially for mothers whose children have been killed in gun violence. Efforts are required to foster community engagement and social connections to help these mothers feel less isolated and for them and their families, especially young people and children, to feel safe and more supported. With dedicated resources and support, mothers and other community stakeholders can mobilise to advocate for policy changes that address the root causes of gun violence and promote safer communities.

The stories of these mothers serve as a sad reminder of the devastating and long-term human cost of gun violence and should be more widely recognised. By listening to the experiences of mothers and amplifying their voices, we can work towards creating a society that values the lives of all individuals and strives to prevent such tragedies from occurring.

Everyone has a role to play. Without the help of government, police, the justice sector, and communities, the work GFSA does is impossible to measure, and it is impossible to reach the goal of a safe and secure nation and a Gun Free South Africa.

VOICES ON ARMS CONTROL

"Voices on arms control" is a publication series dedicated to case studies by civil society actors which aim to draw attention to pertinent issues of peace, security and human rights that affect local communities in the Global South.

Central in these case studies are experiences of communities negatively affected by the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and the deficient systems of SALW control in order to promote and enrich broader debates on SALW control in national, regional and international contexts.



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