

Gun Free Zones

Can we stem the flow of guns?

Gun deaths and injuries are the cause of terrible trauma for the people of South Africa. **Adele Kirsten** talks about an innovative community project, Gun Free, which over the years has wrought some important changes.

“At first people got guns to fight the apartheid government, but then after some time they used them for criminal activities. Yes, we used to keep guns on the school premises but I made sure that before I left school I declared the school a gun free zone.”
Thabiso Mollo

Thabiso Mollo, a member of the Gun Control Alliance and a student activist in the early 90s, was SRC President at his school in Diepkloof, Soweto. Like many young men his age who were politically active in the late 1980s and early 90s, Mollo carried a gun. However, as a member of the Diepkloof Youth Against Crime initiative he became active in the Gun Free Zone (GFZ) campaign in the late 90s and got rid of his gun. Instead, he is now active in his local community policing forum and works with schools and taverns/shebeens in his community encouraging them to make their premises a Gun Free Zone. For Mollo, getting rid of guns was an important part of his vision for a new South Africa – a country in which we could all be free from the fear of gun violence.

Making South Africa a safer place for all of us is an enormous challenge, especially given the high levels of gun violence. South Africa has one of the highest reported firearm deaths in the world – every day more than 30 people are killed with guns. South Africa is similar to other countries such as Brazil and Colombia that have high levels of gun ownership and high rates of gun violence. The public in South Africa owns six times as many guns as the police and military.

In 1994 there were 3.5 million licensed firearms in the hands of



2.4 million individuals, with approximately 1 500 new gun licence applications received each day at the Central Firearms Register. Although licensed firearm ownership has increased slightly over the last ten years, there has been a significant reduction in the approval of new gun licence applications. This is partly because the new gun law has made the process of getting a firearm licence more difficult, but it is also because of the work done by community activists such as Thabiso Mollo.

GUN FREE ZONE CAMPAIGN

One way to reduce gun violence is to restrict or limit where guns may be used or carried. The GFZ campaign which was started by the NGO, Gun Free South Africa (GFSA), in 1995 is one way of doing this.

One of the main aims of the GFZ campaign is to enable people to do



Gun Free South Africa



something practical about gun violence in their communities by creating public spaces in which people can feel safe and transform South Africa from a violence-ridden society to a gun-free society.

Another GFZ aim is to change the way South Africans think about guns by challenging the idea that guns bring security and thereby help to reduce the demand for guns. The GFZ campaign also encourages debates about the dangers of firearms, alternative forms of defence and broad public safety issues such as improved street lighting and improved community police relations.

A Gun Free Zone therefore is a space in which firearms and ammunition are not welcome and this is usually shown by a 'no-gun' sign: a red circle around a gun with a diagonal slash through the gun. This simple visual image communicates a very clear message: 'no guns allowed.'

The GFZ campaign is a community based initiative which relies on the participation of community members. They declare that public spaces in their communities such as recreation centres, community halls, shebeens and churches as GFZs.

GFZs are now widespread throughout South Africa. They are in educational institutions such as schools and universities, in churches, in community centres, in

health facilities such as hospitals and local community clinics, in taverns and shebeens, at banks and other corporate buildings, in local, provincial and national government buildings and at some open public spaces such as sports stadiums.

GFZs have made a difference in several communities across South Africa. In Mapela, a rural village in Limpopo Province, people active in the campaign reported a decrease in the number of gun shot victims coming to the local health clinic and a decrease in the number of gun owners publicly carrying their weapons. This has made residents feel safer both in their homes and as they go about their daily business.

INFLUENCING IMPORTANT POLICY

The GFZ campaign has mobilised grassroots support for the vision of a safe and secure society as well as influenced the development of new policy such as strengthening South Africa's national gun laws. This happened as a result of GFZs receiving a lot of media coverage because they were seen as an interesting and innovative response to the high level of violent crime in South Africa. The campaign also gained a high profile because community activists organised and lobbied their MPs to make it a criminal offence to bring a firearm into a Gun Free Zone.

In June 2000, community

representatives as far afield as Mapela, Rustenburg, Orange Farm and Elsie's River made oral submissions to parliament during the public hearings on the Firearms Control Bill. These activists lobbied MPs to pass a law that would introduce tough measures on gun ownership, giving examples of how the GFZs in their communities had made them less fearful and had contributed to a safer and more secure environment.

The end result was the Firearms Control Act (FCA). This new law raised the barrier for firearms ownership through a number of provisions such as increasing the age limit for ownership from 16 to 21 years, requiring a competency certificate to demonstrate fitness to possess a gun before being able to apply for a firearms licence, and imposing limits on the number of guns that any one person can own, including only one handgun for self-defence. The new law also made provision for the minister to declare any premises or category of premises as Firearm Free Zones (FFZ), making it a criminal offence to carry or store any firearm or ammunition in a FFZ.

The availability and abuse of firearms has contributed significantly to the high levels of violent crime in South Africa. This makes the FCA an important tool to combat crime as it strengthens the powers of the police and the



Gun Free zone have mushroomed in townships all over South Africa



courts, enhancing their capacity to act against the misuse of legal guns and the illegal use of firearms.

The Act is just one part of a wider strategy to reduce the flow of guns into South African communities, to reduce violent crime, to promote development and to enhance the quality of life of all South Africans. The GFZ campaign is one way in which communities can participate in helping to reduce violent crime by making decisions about whether or not they allow guns into their schools and their homes.

Although South Africa continues to have high levels of violent crime, since 2000 there has been a gradual 'stabilisation' and downward trend in most violent crime categories. The South African Police Service (SAPS) Annual Report (September 2006) showed a significant drop in several violent crime categories, with murder being the most important. In 1995 murders peaked at 26 877 staying at this level for several years, with a 10% drop in 1999. Since then the murder rate has been decreasing each year, with a total of 18 545 murders recorded in 2005/2006. This is over a 23% decrease since 1994.

Although firearms remain the

leading cause of non-natural death in South Africa, data collected at mortuaries across the country show that since 2001 there has been a steady decrease in the rates of fatal violence especially in four cities: Johannesburg, Tshwane, Cape Town and Durban. This was mainly due to the decrease in firearm deaths. For example, in Cape Town there were just over one thousand firearm related deaths in 2001 (34.1/100 000) whereas in 2004 this had gone down to just over 600 deaths (18.7/100 000).

This means that over four years the rate of firearm deaths in Cape Town has almost halved.

This Cape Town example shows that it is possible to reduce and prevent gun violence. It requires a variety of interventions such as community participation in public safety initiatives, developing new policies such as strengthening national gun laws and improved policing.

If you want to find out more about getting involved in the GFZ campaign call GFSA in Johannesburg at (011) 403 4590 or in Cape Town (021) 686 1302.

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