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SAGA Op-Ed | Correlation versus Causation in the South African Firearm Rights Debate

Opinion by Shaun Lyle, Saga Trustee

Overview

The South Africa debate over firearms RIGHTS is always clouded by statistics that are presented as self-evident “truths.” Yet, much of the public conversation fails to distinguish between correlation and causation — a critical difference when it comes to shaping laws that affect the lives and rights of ordinary citizens.

The latest revelations of NEDLAC and BUSA manoeuvring behind closed doors to influence firearm legislation only confirms the danger: **when policymakers ‘confuse’ correlation with causation**, they get the **answers wrong and put lives, livelihoods and rights at risk**.

A Tired Narrative - Past its Sell By Date

Government and anti-gun activists frequently argue that “more guns equals more crime.” They point to the proliferation of firearms in society and the persistently high levels of violent crime as proof of a direct causal relationship. At face value that may sound plausible **however**, this twisted reasoning is a textbook case of conflating correlation with causation - nothing more than intellectual fraud. The fact that two trends move together does not mean one causes the other.

What the Data Actually Shows

Violent crime in South Africa long predates today’s patterns of civilian firearm ownership. Its roots lie in poverty, unemployment, collapsed policing capacity and rampant corruption. Firearms did NOT cause this crisis — they are simply present within it. Treating coincidence as causation is not just flawed reasoning, it is wilful deception.

The mere presence of firearms cannot explain why violent crime remains among the highest in the world.



- **Illegal vs. Legal Guns:** the vast majority of firearms used in gun crime are illegal, stolen, or trafficked via corrupt police channels. Legal firearm owners are not the causal driver of crime trends. *The existence of legal firearms correlates with the presence of crime but does not cause it!*
- **Protective Uses:** Thousands of South Africans owe their lives to law-abiding citizens who used licensed firearms to stop attacks (the assault on Ian Cameron and his colleagues last week alone is further evidence). These cases demonstrate causation in the opposite direction — *more armed citizens often equals fewer victims and more survivors.*
- **Comparative Reality:** International comparisons that where law enforcement is functional, even with high levels of civilian firearm ownership (Switzerland, Czech Republic), violent crime remains low. Where policing is weak (*South Africa, Colombia & Brazil*) crime soars regardless of ownership levels.

Correlation Without Causation

NEDLAC and BUSA are highly susceptible to the false equation of correlation equals causation, to justify sweeping changes and restrictions. The claim that '*fewer guns = less crime*' is **patently false and dangerous**:

- **Restricting civilian ownership** will only disarm the law-abiding and have **NO** effect on the circulation of illegal weapons:
- **Tightening licensing** burdens ordinary citizens while police corruption and cross-border smuggling feed the criminal market.
- **Reducing legal firearms** does not reduce violent crime, rather it reduces the citizens' ability to counter it.

A policy built on the **lie** that “***correlation equals causation***” is not evidence based. It is ideology dressed up as data – with ordinary South Africans paying the price in blood.

Towards a Causal Understanding

An honest approach requires separating the symptoms and the drivers of crime; namely:

- State capture, incompetence, corruption and institutional collapse,
- Socio-economic inequality exacerbated by economically destructive policies, and
- Protected organised crime syndicates, aided by corrupt officials.

If civilian gun ownership caused violent crime, then societies with fewer civilian firearms would be safer, however the exact opposite is true. International comparisons including that of South Africa and Brazil, prove that chaos results when policing fails - **not** when citizens are armed.

Where law enforcement is functional, even high rates of legal civilian firearm ownership correlate with relatively low violent crime.



Unless root causes are addressed, attempting to disarm the law-abiding will **NOT** reduce violence or crime! Pretending otherwise is political theatre — a cynical attempt to blame shift yet again for government failures.

The Hard Truth

The firearms rights debate in South Africa cannot be reduced to a simplistic formula of “guns equals crime.” That claim **mistakes, confuses and conflates correlation for causation** and in doing so threatens to strip citizens of their rights while failing to curb violent crime.

Less Guns = Less Crime..... **FALSE**
Less ILLEGAL guns = Less Crime.. **TRUE** direct
More Guns = More Crime **FALSE**
More LEGAL guns = Less Crime..... **TRUE** inverse

The only realistic path forward is rational and transparent data-driven policy rooted in **causal reality, not rhetorical correlation** (unless of course the covert intent is chaos itself)! A more nuanced understanding is necessary IF policy is to be effective, fair and grounded in reality rather than political ideology and meaningless anti-gun rhetoric.

SAGA will continue to challenge unmandated, unaccountable bodies lacking jurisdiction that attempt to launder agenda driven circular ‘logic’ into law. South Africans deserve better and have the RIGHT to self-determined safety plus security - rather than detached political deflection and scapegoating.

Refer also to SAGA opinion piece: The Final Red Line, Why South Africans Must Defend Their Right To Armed Self Defence, On Target Africa - Issue 74, July 2025

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