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NORWOOD POLICE STATION: STOLEN FIREARMS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The control of firearms remains a contentious issue in South Africa. The continuous loss and theft of firearms, both in terms of SAPS-owned and privately-owned firearms, are a significant challenge, as these firearms find their way into the already significant illegal pool of firearms and are used in the commission of crime. Over the past five financial years, 3 405 SAPS-owned firearms were reported lost or stolen, of which less than half was recovered. Coupled thereto is the lack of consequence management related to the loss and theft of firearms with no disciplinary steps taken against the vast majority of officers for losing their firearms. A 2020 research report by the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service stated that “...it is evident that the majority of SAPS officers are exonerated of wrongdoing or negligence for the loss or theft of police-owned firearms” and that “...unjustifiable absolving of officers for negligence pertaining to their firearms conveys a message of impunity, and exacerbates the levels of ill-discipline in the organisation.”

The Norwood police station firearm theft involves privately-owned firearms that were reported lost, stolen and surrendered during the most recent firearm amnesties. The theft of several firearms from the Norwood police station’s evidence room (SAPS 13 Store) in late 2021 is the latest case of firearm-theft from SAPS 13 Stores.

This paper provides an overview of the events leading to the uncovering of the theft at the Norwood police station and actions that followed; the number of lost/stolen firearms over the past five financial year, together with the recovery rate of these firearms; an overview of the causes for the loss and theft of SAPS-owned firearms; and disciplinary action taken against officers between 2016/17 and 2018/19. The paper concludes with key issues for consideration by the Portfolio Committee on Police during engagements scheduled for Wednesday, 23 February 2022.

2. NORWOOD FIREARM THEFT CASE

The following regarding the theft of firearms from the Norwood police station should be noted:



- In 2021, media reports circulated that firearms were reportedly stolen from the evidence room (SAPS 13 Store) at the Norwood police stations in Johannesburg.
- This came after four firearms, which were previously submitted for analysis at the Ballistics Section (Forensic Science Laboratory), were recovered from two separate crime scenes, the one involving a cash-in-transit robbery and the other the attempted murder of police officers.
- The Ballistics Section informed the National Priority Violent Crimes Bureau (NPVC): Directorate for Priority Crimes Investigation (DPCI).
- In August 2021, an enquiry was registered to investigate the possible theft of firearms from the Norwood police station.
- On 03 August 2021, the NPVC and Gauteng DPCI visited the station to conduct an audit of the SAPS13 store but could not gain entry to the safes and storeroom (the member responsible was not available).
- The member responsible for the SAPS 13 store at the Norwood police station committed suicide on the day on which the enquiry was registered.
- On 05 August 2021, the NPVC received a report stating that the seals of the locks, safes and storeroom had been tampered with.
- On 10 August 2021, the audit continued and a total of 704 firearms were found in the SAPS 13 store.
- It was established that 175 firearms were missing from the safe, including 134 exhibit firearms and 41 amnesty firearms. It was originally reported that a total of 158 firearms were stolen in the incident, including R5's, R1's and AK047s.¹
- From the 704 firearms found in the safe, 530 was test fired for the Integrated Ballistic Identification System (IBIS) purposes. The remained 174 firearms could not be safely test fired due to unserviceability and age.
- The station commander of the Norwood police station resigned on 14 January 2022 and an acting station commander was appointed.

Following the reports, the Portfolio Committee on Police released a media statement and called for:

- Urgent strategies to fix challenges facing the SAPS at its evidence storerooms.
- Immediate disciplinary action must be taken against any police member found to have been involved in the incident.
- The monitoring and oversight of SAPS 13 Stores are critical control measures that must be strengthened.

¹ Pijoo, I (2022)



- The general lack of consequence management against members in breach of policies and laws is unacceptable.

3. STOLEN, LOST AND RECOVERED FIREARMS

3.1. SAPS-owned lost/stolen firearms

During 2020/21, 566 SAPS-owned firearms were reported lost or stolen, which is less than the previous financial year when 605 SAPS-owned firearms were reported lost/stolen. The table below shows that, over a five-year period (2016/17 to 2020/21), 3 405 SAPS-owned firearms were reported lost/stolen.

SAPS-owned firearms reported lost/stolen over the past five financial years

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	Total
760	800	607	672	566	3 405

During the 2020/21 financial year, 424 SAPS-owned firearms reported lost or stolen were recovered, which is less than the target of 482. The table below shows that, over a five-year period (2016/17 to 2020/21), 1 674 identifiable SAPS-owned firearms reported lost/stolen were recovered.

SAPS-owned firearms reported lost/stolen recovered over the past five financial years

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	Total
71	358	362	459	424	1 674

The two tables above show that over the past five financial years, less than half of the reported lost/stolen SAPS-owned firearms have been recovered.

3.2. Privately-owned firearms lost/stolen

The Norwood police station firearm theft involves privately-owned firearms that were reported lost, stolen and surrendered during the most recent firearm amnesties. In terms of all other firearms (not SAPS-owned), the following:

Number of lost/stolen firearms recovered over the past five financial years

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
17 260	18 592	7 141	4 204	2 160

Over the past five financial years, a total of 49 357 firearms were reported as lost or stolen. During 2020/21, the SAPS recovered 2 160 stolen/lost firearms, which is 2 065 less than the set target of 4 225. The table above shows that the number of lost/stolen firearms has decreased significantly over the past five financial years, from 17 260 recoveries to 2 160 in 2020/21.

3.3. Firearms in circulation

According to the SAPS, as at 15 May 2021, there were 319 307 outstanding firearm-related renewal application, of which 46 111 are first time renewals and 273 196 are multiple renewals. In terms of the number of firearms in circulation, the SAPS reported the following:



Table 1: Firearms in circulation, with type and ownership

Type	Total owners	Total firearms
Individuals	1 614 291	2 718 300
Non-official institutions	10 072	164 249
Official institutions	438	116 719
Total	1 624 802	2 999 268

Source: SAPS (2021)

4. RESEARCH BY CSPS: FIREARMS LOST/STOLEN AND DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS

In 2020, the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service (CSPS) conducted research on the management of misconduct in the SAPS related to SAPS-owned lost and stolen firearms. According to the report, in cases where firearms were stolen, the cause of theft was mostly negligence. Firearms were placed under mattresses, left in toilets or forgotten under couches or in wardrobes.² In instances of firearms being lost, these are normally forcefully taken during operations or when a police officer responds to a crime incident.³ According to the CSPS, *“instances of firearm theft or loss also raise questions about whether police officers intentionally lose their firearms and if they are conspiring with criminals”*.⁴

It seems that the theft and loss of firearms are not treated like a serious offence by SAPS management. Between 2016/17 and 2018/19⁵, a total of 285 disciplinary cases were instituted out of 2 167 stolen and lost firearms, which represents 13% of cases referred for disciplinary action.⁶ Of the 285 disciplinary referrals, 58% of officers were found guilty, 14% not guilty, 25% received a suspended dismissal. According to the CSPS:

“Taking into account the low percentages of disciplinary cases referred for disciplinary proceedings, it is evident that the majority of SAPS officers are exonerated of wrongdoing or negligence for the loss or theft of police-owned firearms. This translates to poor consequence management in the SAPS. This may be understandable when officers are not in control of a situation which resulted in the loss or theft of their firearms. However, unjustifiable absolving of officers for negligence pertaining to their firearms conveys a message of impunity, and exacerbates the levels of ill-discipline in the organisation.”⁷

Further, the CSPS stated that data on police firearms used in the commission of crimes would greatly assist to hold the SAPS accountable for missing firearms.

² CSPS (2020)

³ CSPS (2020)

⁴ CSPS (2020)

⁵ The data was drawn by the CSPS from the SAPS Personnel Management Division in 2019. Details of disciplinary actions regarding lost/stolen SAPS-owned firearm in not available in Annual Reports.

⁶ CSPS (2020)

⁷ CSPS (2020)



5. KEY AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION

The following key areas could be considered:

- 1) The presentation indicates that various complaints regarding the Norwood police station were received from the Community Policing Forum (CPF). The SAPS should provide details on the nature of these complaints and when the complaints were received. The SAPS has since developed and implemented an Action Plan addressing specific focus areas including matters highlighted during discussions with the CPF. The SAPS should provide the Committee with a copy of the Action Plan with clear time-frames of implementation.
- 2) The presentation states that 41 amnesty firearms were stolen from the SAPS 13 Store at the Norwood police station. The SAPS should provide the dates on which the amnesty firearms were surrendered and indicate why the firearms were still held at the station? (The last amnesty period ended on 31 January 2021). According to previous presentations by the SAPS, central storage facilities were established in all provinces and that surrendered firearms must be sent to these facilities within 14 days.
- 3) The presentation stated that an inspection was launched at the Norwood police station on 'several aspects' and that various shortcomings were identified. The SAPS should indicate what 'aspects' were covered during the inspection and what shortcomings were identified.
- 4) The SAPS should provide details on the disciplinary cases that have been initiated against identified managers and supervisors at the Norwood police station.
- 5) The SAPS should explain the matter in which the new management team was appointed and whether the persons are from the Norwood police station or other stations.
- 6) When will the investigation be completed to establish the exact number of firearms that were stolen from the Norwood police station?
- 7) What was the circumstances in which the member responsible for the SAPS 13 store at the Norwood police station committed suicide? Was an official firearm used? What support are given to police members to prevent tragedies like this? Was any psychological support given to staff at the Norwood police station following the suicide?
- 8) Are all Designated Firearm Officers (DFOs) vetted and/or subjected to lifestyle audits? Are DFO's still used as auxiliary staff?
- 9) Will the previous Norwood police station's Station Commander (that resigned) face criminal charges despite the resignation? Police members should not be allowed to evade criminal charges by merely resigning from the SAPS.
- 10) Will the SAPS launch an audit of all SAPS 13 Stores countrywide? If not, why not? The Norwood police station theft case may not be an isolated event and it is reasonable to suspect that this is also the case at numerous police stations.



6. REFERENCES

Civilian Secretariat for Police Service (CSPS) (2020). Research Brief: Managing misconduct in the SAPS: SAPS' Lost and Stolen Firearms. December 2020.

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