

A photograph of a traditional windmill on a hill, silhouetted against a bright orange and red sunset sky. The foreground shows dark, rolling hills.

Farm attacks and murders in South Africa (2023)

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Introduction

Attacks and murders on farms and smallholdings that occurred in South Africa in 2023 are analysed and described in this report. It is part of an annual series of publicly available reports that AfriForum has been publishing since 2019.

AfriForum has been engaged in a campaign to combat attacks and murders on farms and smallholdings since its inception in 2006. The campaign is multifaceted and consists of various initiatives, such as

- raising international awareness about the phenomena at the United Nations (UN),
- establishing and maintaining community safety structures in rural and urban areas,
- conducting research on the National Rural Safety Strategy (NRSS) and
- urging the South African government to improve safety in rural communities.

In November 2023 AfriForum participated in a review session hosted by the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). Various issues were raised before the Committee, including the South African government's insufficient efforts to combat farm attacks.¹ A practical example of AfriForum's efforts to curb farm attacks includes the work done by AfriForum's 170 neighbourhood watches² across all nine provinces. These neighbourhood watches provide volunteers with training in various safety and security aspects, while they empower local communities to respond to crime incidents in a responsible manner. For example, in September 2023 AfriForum's Potgietersrus neighbourhood watch as well as other private security organisations successfully detained four people who were purportedly involved in a farm attack in the Mokopane region.³

A core focus of AfriForum is establishing a safer society for its members, supporters and other citizens.⁴ Therefore, reports on farm attacks and murders contribute to stakeholders who understand this phenomenon.

Methodology and data collection

AfriForum's Community Safety division established its database in 2019 to track and record farm attacks and murders. The database provides AfriForum with farm attack data, which AfriForum's community structures can then use to develop counterstrategies. Moreover, the South African Police Service (SAPS) publishes data on farm attacks, but the prerogative for publishing crime data rests with the Minister of Police.⁵ The SAPS therefore has control over which crime statistics are made public. Moreover, the SAPS has neglected in the past to publish statistics on farm

attacks and murders,⁶ which offers little guarantee that farm attack statistics will be published consistently in the future. For example, the SAPS published statistics on attacks and murders on farms for the first quarter of the 2021/2022 financial year (April to June 2021),⁷ although the report on the second quarter (July to September 2021) did not include data on farm attacks, although farm murders were included.⁸

The data on farm attacks and murders that are reflected in this report were therefore collected from several sources, including AfriForum's Community Safety division (in cooperation with the SAPS, private security companies and farm attack victims), the SAPS's rural safety meetings and media reports. During the collection and processing phase, it is ascertained whether an attack or murder meets the criteria of the NRSS's definition of a farm attack. Attacks and murders that do not meet these criteria are not included in the data reported in this report.

It is also important to note that the farm murder statistics that are reported on in this report may be subject to change because information sometimes only becomes available long after the incident occurred or because of insufficient or conflicting information regarding a case. This report therefore represents the most accurate data on farm attacks and murders for 2023 that was available on AfriForum's Community Safety database at the time of publishing this report. However, it may be that some readers of this report are aware of or are in possession of information regarding farm attacks and/or murders that is not included in this report. In that case, they are welcome to contribute verifiable information to AfriForum's database of farm attacks to further promote the accuracy of research of this nature.

For the section on arrests (see *Arrests per province*, p. 10), a desktop research media analysis approach was followed to track and determine the date of detention based on available information in the Community Safety database. It is important to note that media outlets may not report all the arrests that relate to farm attacks and murders. As a result, the statistics on the arrest rates for suspects of farm attacks and murders in this report must be interpreted with caution. There is a further distinction made in this report between *farm murders* and *farm attack incidents*. As a result, *incident* refers to a single event. Therefore, one murder incident may comprise multiple victims and suspects. However, since it took place on one particular day and location, it is considered as a single incident.

Definition of a farm attack

The SAPS formulated a definition for farm attacks and murders in order to maintain consistency when recording crimes that are committed on farms and smallholdings.⁹ AfriForum employs the current definition of a farm attack, which is the one used by the SAPS in the NRSS:¹⁰

...[a]cts of violence against person(s) living in rural areas, including farms and smallholdings, refer to acts aimed at person(s) residing in, working in, or visiting rural areas, whether with the intent to murder, rape, rob or inflict bodily harm.

In addition, all acts of violence against the infrastructure and property in the rural community, which are aimed at disrupting farming activities or other commercial concerns, whether the motive(s) are related to the commission of other crime(s), ideology, land disputes, land issues, revenge, grievances, racist concerns or intimidation are included in this definition.

The definition excludes incidents that are related to domestic violence or alcohol abuse, cases that result from commonplace social interaction between people, and any labour disputes.

The structure of this report

This report comprises four sections. In the first section (*Frequency of farm attacks and murders from 2022 to 2023*, p. 3) the incidence of farm attacks and murders for 2022 and 2023 is compared. The geographical location and months during which incidents occurred in 2023 are detailed in the second section (*Farm attacks and murders (2023)*, p. 4). The third section (*Profile of victims of farm attacks and murders (2023)*, p. 6) is dedicated to a discussion of the demographics of the victims. The specific characteristics of the suspects are outlined in the last section (*Modus operandi and the apprehension of suspects (2023)*, p. 9).

Frequency of farm attacks and murders from 2022 to 2023

The number of attacks and murders from 2022 to 2023 (1 January 1 to 31 December) is depicted in figure 1. There is a noteworthy decline in the number of attacks from 339 in 2022 to 296 in 2023. However, farm murders did not experience the same substantial decrease in the same period, as there was only one less murder. The reason for the decline in the number of attacks remains unknown and could be attributed to various factors. One possibility is that safety measures that are being employed by rural communities are deterring farm attackers. However, it may simply be that some attacks are unreported.

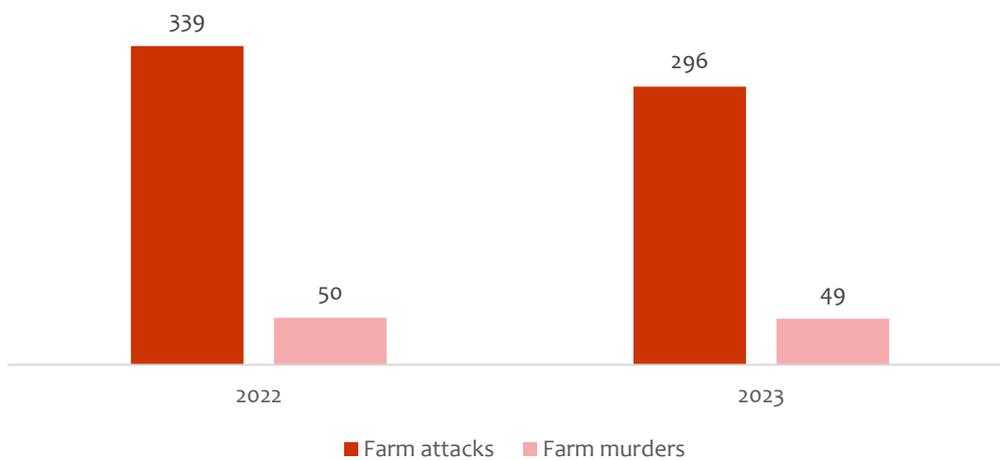


Figure 1: Number of farm attacks and murders from 2022 to 2023¹¹

If one compares the figures that were released by the SAPS for the 2023 calendar year (54 murders in total) to that of AfriForum (49 in total), there is only a slight variance in numbers. The number of pure attacks – i.e., farm attacks that did not result in murder – that were recorded by AfriForum cannot be compared to the SAPS’s numbers, however. The reason for this is that the SAPS’s statistics for 2023 represent the number of charges or counts as opposed to the number of incidents.^{12, 13, 14, 15}

Farm attacks and murders (2023)

Overview of farm attacks and murders per month

The number of attacks and murders for each month in 2023 is represented in figure 2.

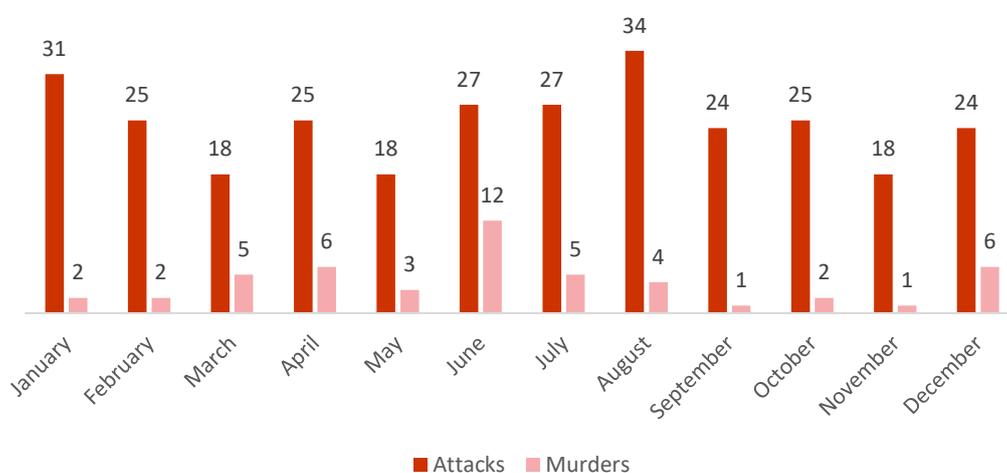


Figure 2: Farm attacks and murders per month (2023)

August presented with the highest number of farm attacks (which also includes farm murders), while November presented with the fewest incidences. The most attacks (85) were recorded in the third quarter of 2023 (July to September), while the second quarter (April to June) had the highest number of murders (21). June had the highest number (12) of murders, double that of the months with the second-greatest number of murders, April and December. As can be seen, farm attacks occurred in every month. On average, therefore, the country suffered 5,69 farm attacks every week.

Overview of farm attacks and murders per province

Due to limited available data, an accurate representation of the farm murder rate per 100 000 population cannot be determined at this point.¹⁶ Therefore, figure 3 represents only the frequency of attacks per province. In 2023, most attacks (83) were executed in Gauteng. The province also recorded the highest number of murders (11). According to the data, the frequency of attacks across Limpopo, the Northwest, the Free State and the Western Cape is more or less the same. The Northern Cape had only three attacks and no murders.

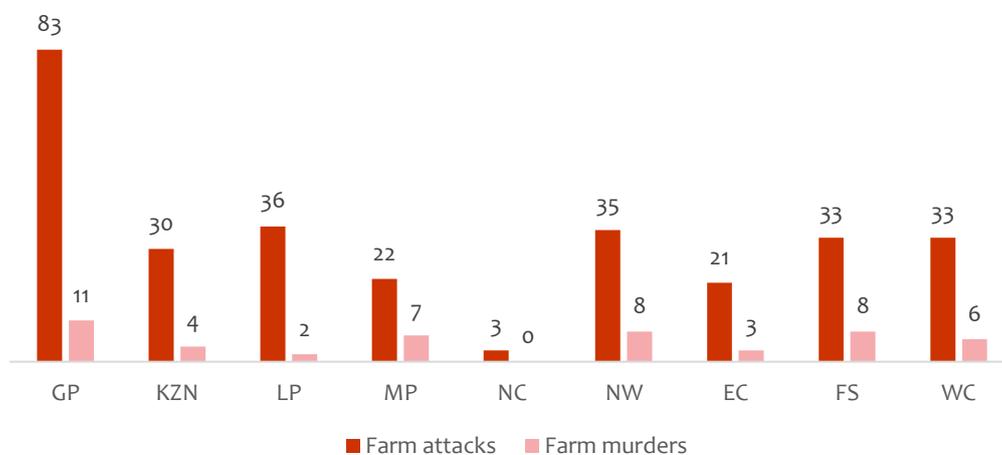


Figure 3: Farm attacks and murders per province (2023)

Type of premises where murders were committed

According to the NRSS definition, a farm is “an area of land and its infrastructure used for agricultural pursuits, as well as ecotourism and conservation purposes [...]”¹⁷ Similarly, it defines a smallholding as “a plot outside a built-up area of a city or town used for agricultural, residential or other purposes, but for reporting purposes, excluding properties subdivided into separate

residential units, informal settlements or land, which is officially rezoned to become clearly distinguishable from an agricultural holding”.¹⁸

As indicated in figure 4, most murders (63%) were committed on farms, and 36% of murders were committed on smallholdings.

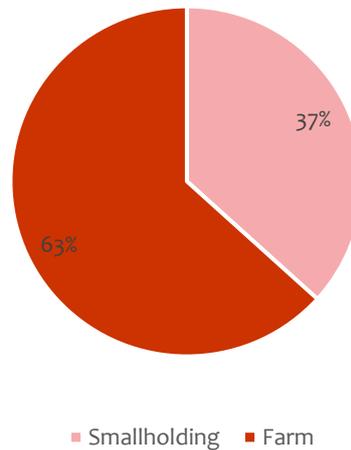


Figure 4: Percentage of murders that took place on farms and smallholdings (2023)

Profile of victims of farm attacks and murders (2023)

In this section of the report, victims’ demographics are analysed and presented. For this section of the report, *farm attack victims* refer to people who were murdered as well as those who have survived the murder incident. For 2023, victims of farm murders included farmers, farmworkers, family members of farmers and residents of smallholdings.

Age and gender of murder victims

Current statistics for the whole of South Africa regarding the age and gender of the victims of farm attacks are limited. According to available data for 2023, 81% of farm murder victims of whom the gender could be ascertained were male, and 19% female.

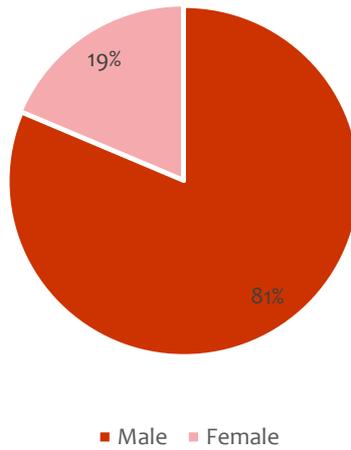


Figure 5: Gender of murder victims ¹⁹

The youngest murder victim was a 14-year-old boy who was shot in the chest at point-blank range.²⁰ The oldest murder victim was an 87-year-old man who, together with his son, was ambushed by five armed suspects on his farm.²¹ Although the findings of the 2023 study indicated that nearly two-thirds of murder victims were older than 60 years of age, it is clear that any age can be a victim of farm murders and that individuals who carry out these attacks do not discriminate based on the victims' age.

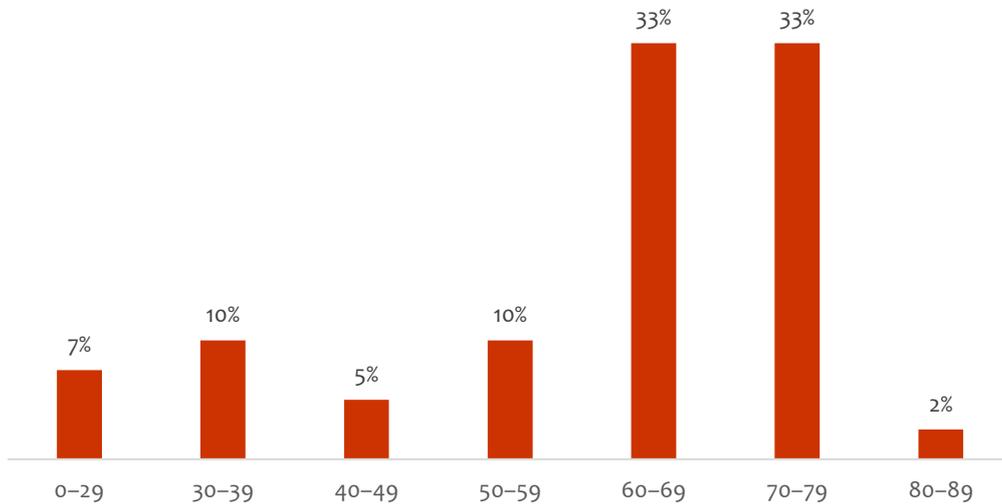


Figure 6: Age of murder victims ²²

Number of victims

The number of victims (including those who died as well as survivors) for each murder incident is depicted in table 1. (Note that there were 44 incidents, but 49 murders.) In 45% of murder incidents, two victims were involved, while 39% of incidents only had one victim.

Table 1: Number of incidents per victim count (survived and murdered)

| Number of victims | Number of incidents | Percentage of incidents (rounded off) |
|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | 17 | 39% |
| 2 | 20 | 45% |
| 3 | 3 | 7% |
| 4 | 3 | 7% |
| 6 | 1 | 2% |

Methods by which victims were murdered

Most farm murders are characterised by exceptionally high levels of brutality.²³ The methods that are reported to commit farm murders are set out in figure 7. However, it is important to note that a victim's death may be attributed to various causes. For example, in one case it was reported that the victim had been assaulted as well as stabbed;²⁴ in another, the victim was bludgeoned with an object (probably an iron bar) and his throat slit.²⁵

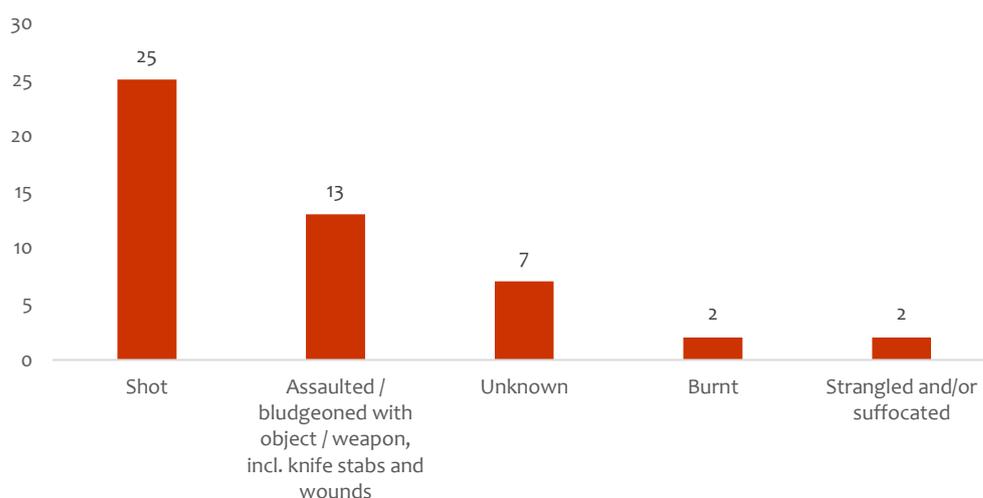


Figure 7: Methods by which farm murder victims were killed

51% of victims were shot – either once or several times. In one case a victim and his life partner were shot six and four times respectively.²⁶ In another case, a victim was shot at point-blank range before two attackers entered his home and assaulted his wife.^{27, 28}

In 27% of cases victims were either assaulted and/or bludgeoned to death, either with or without objects such as knives, sharp instruments or blunt objects. (This category also includes victims whose throats were slit.) Some victims were so severely assaulted that the act caused their death, as was the case of one Eastern Cape farmer who was beaten in addition to being tortured with a burning object.²⁹ In another case, a husband was stabbed in the neck, and his wife's throat was slit.³⁰ Two elderly victims, one male and one female, were robbed on a farm in Limpopo and are presumed to have been burned alive.³¹

While the focus of the section above was on murders, there were incidents throughout 2023 where individuals survived farm attacks, but required hospitalisation.^{32, 33} It is not unreasonable to postulate that – in some of these cases at least – the victims could have died from their injuries. A case in point is that of one farmer who managed to make a miraculous recovery in the hospital after he was shot through his right lung.³⁴

Modus operandi and the apprehension of suspects (2023)

Farm attackers and murderers employ a diverse range of techniques to commit their crimes. A noticeable trend is the tying up of victims in their homes before proceeding with robbery or murder. Additionally, in some instances, the attackers steal victims' vehicles to use these as getaway vehicles. Some of these vehicles are later found abandoned.

Number of suspects per murder incident

Table 2 shows the number of suspects who are involved in murder incidents. Although there were 44 murder incidents in which 49 people were murdered, only the categories where the minimum number of suspects could be identified are included. Therefore, table 2 lists only 33 incidents. The categories that were excluded are cases in which it was reported that SAPS were on the hunt for suspects or that a number of suspects had entered the premises. Another point to keep in mind is that in the event that suspect(s) are apprehended, it may come to light that more suspect(s) were involved in a particular incident.

As is set out in table 2, in the majority of cases more than one suspect was involved in a murder incident. In eleven of the incidents two suspects were involved in a murder incident representing the majority (33%) of incidents where at least two suspects were involved in an incident.

Table 2: Number of murder incidents in which one or more suspects were involved

| Number of suspects | Number of incidents of suspects per murders incidents | Percentage of incidents ³⁵ |
|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | 6 | 18% |
| 2 | 11 | 33% |
| 3 | 5 | 15% |
| 4 | 4 | 12% |
| 5 | 4 | 12% |
| 6 | 1 | 3% |
| 7 | 1 | 3% |
| 8 | 1 | 3% |
| Unknown/unidentifiable | 11 | - |

Weapons used and items stolen

Farm attackers and murderers employ a range of weapons, which includes firearms, knives, pangas (machetes), pickaxes and iron bars. In some cases, victims were not only attacked with weapons but were also subjected to assault. Although not much is known about the exact types of firearms that were used in attacks, the SAPS reported a variety of weapons, including .9 mm pistols. In one case it was reported that a shotgun was used to shoot a minor. In another incident, it was alleged that an AK-47 assault rifle was used.

Stolen items encompass a range of goods from mobile phones and cash to laptops, vehicles and firearms (such as hunting rifles).

Arrests per province

AfriForum reported in 2023 on arrests and prosecution of suspects who are involved in farm attacks and murders, concluding that the rate of arrests and prosecutions is low.³⁶ In the period under review for the current report, suspects were caught or apprehended through various methods. The SAPS apprehended some as they fled the crime scene, while SAPS detectives tracked down others.

Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape have the highest arrest rate (more than 75%) for murder incidents in 2023. In contrast, Gauteng had the lowest arrest rate (11%), followed by Northwest (13%) and KwaZulu-Natal (25%). It is concerning that while Gauteng and Northwest had the highest number of murder incidents (nine and eight, respectively), murder suspects were apprehended in only one murder incident per province.

In terms of the arrest ratio, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape both achieved a 100% arrest rate; however, Limpopo had only one murder incident, while in the Eastern Cape suspects were apprehended in all three murder incidents.

Table 3: Arrests that were made in relation to murders that were committed

| Province | Number of incidents | Number of incidents that resulted in arrest | Percentage incident arrested |
|---------------|---------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Eastern Cape | 3 | 3 | 100% |
| Free State | 7 | 5 | 71% |
| Gauteng | 9 | 1 | 11% |
| KwaZulu-Natal | 4 | 1 | 25% |
| Limpopo | 1 | 1 | 100% |
| Mpumalanga | 7 | 4 | 57% |
| Northern Cape | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| Northwest | 8 | 1 | 13% |
| Western Cape | 5 | 4 | 80% |

Conclusion

Although there is a decrease in the number of farm attacks and murders from 2022 to 2023 (which is cause for optimism), AfriForum remains wary of this development. AfriForum has before observed a decline in the number of attacks from one year to the next, only to observe an increase in attacks and murders in the following year. The fact that the number of farm murders has experienced no noteworthy decline is reason for AfriForum to be cautious that this trend will continue since a decrease in murder statistics is usually a good representation of whether other violent crimes and levels of violence are also decreasing.^{37, 38} Moreover, the fact that victims are continually subject to extreme forms of violence points to the ferocity that is associated with these attacks.

Likewise, another testament to the violence in rural communities is reflected in the SAPS's statistics. According to the SAPS's quarterly statistics, there were a total of 353 contact crimes

that had been committed in rural areas, including murder, sexual offences, attempted murders, common assault and assault with the intent to inflict grievously bodily harm as well as robbery with aggravating circumstances.^{39, 40, 41, 42}

As can be seen from statistics (refer to figure 3) the frequency of attacks ranges from province to province, with most attacks executed in Gauteng, while only a small number of attacks occurred in the Northern Cape. This tendency leans credence to AfriForum's view that law enforcement should follow a decentralised approach. This means that, as the extent and frequency of farm attacks vary by geography, the response to farm attacks should also vary. For example, there is an argument to be had that farm murders should be given priority status in terms of resource allocation in Gauteng, Northwest and KwaZulu-Natal since these provinces have the lowest arrest rate for farm murders in relation to farm murder incidents committed.

AfriForum believes in the golden triangle of security solutions: private security, the SAPS and the communities should work together to fight crime. The farm attack and murder figures for 2023 once again underscore the need for safety structures by civil communities to enhance their efforts in combatting farm attacks.

The following are some of the recommendations that should be considered:

- A geographical profiling study should be undertaken to identify farm attack hotspots and trends.
- AfriForum neighbourhood watches must enhance their presence in and around these hotspots.
- AfriForum's Community Safety division should continue to raise awareness of farm attacks and continue to offer safety and security training to rural communities.
- Reporting mechanisms for reporting farm attacks must be improved.
- AfriForum must continue to put pressure on the government to enhance rural safety.

Endnotes

- ¹ AfriForum. 2023. *South African government pressed on farm murders and race quotas before UN committee after AfriForum submits reports*. Media statement on 28 November. Available at <https://afriforum.co.za/en/south-african-government-pressed-on-farm-murders-and-race-quotas-before-un-committee-after-afriforum-submits-reports/>. Accessed on 25 January 2024.
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- ¹¹ The statistics from the previous years have been updated and revised. Numbers may therefore differ from those previously published.
- ¹² South African Police Service. 2023. *Police Recorded Crime Statistics. Republic of South Africa. Fourth Quarter of 2022–2023 Financial year (January 2023 to March 2023)*, p. 23. Available at <https://www.saps.gov.za/services/downloads/4th-Quarter-January%202023-March%202023.pdf>. Accessed on 8 April 2024.
- ¹³ South African Police Service. 2023. *Police Recorded Crime Statistics. Republic of South Africa. First Quarter of 2023–2024 Financial Year (April 2023 to June 2023)*, p. 30. Available at https://www.saps.gov.za/services/downloads/april_june_2023_24_quarter1_presentation.pdf. Accessed on 8 April 2024.
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- ²⁰ Otto, H. 2023 *Rowers gebruik ma as skild teen 14-jarige wat háár wil verdedig*. Netwerk24, 14 October. Available at <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/nuus/misdaad/rowers-gebruik-ma-as-skild-teen-14-jarige-wat-haar-wil-verdedig-20231010>. Accessed on 29 January 2024.
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- ²³ Geldenhuys, K. 2020. *Violent attacks on the farming community*. In *Servamus Community-based Safety and Security Magazine* 113(3): 21–27. Available at <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.10520/EJC-1bb4d711d4>. Accessed on 29 January 2023.
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