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Op-ed

FARM ATTACKS LETHALITY AND THE ACTUAL RISK OF MURDER

By Daryl Swanepoel

A recent article in The Common Sense argues that a farm attack is almost seven times more likely to result in murder than an armed robbery at a home or business elsewhere in South Africa. It is a striking claim, but it needs to be understood carefully.

There are two problems with interpreting it. First, the comparison is not necessarily sound. The farm figure of 22.3 per cent is calculated across the broad category of "farm attacks", which may include robbery, assault, attempted murder and murder, including incidents whose primary purpose was not robbery. The national figure of 3.3 per cent is calculated only from armed robberies at residential and business premises. It excludes assaults, attempted murders and murders occurring outside that narrower category. Dividing 22.3 by 3.3 produces the reported ratio of approximately 6.7, but the result may reflect differences in the composition and definition of the two categories as much as a genuine difference in lethality. The calculation therefore does not necessarily compare like with like.

Second, even if we assume that the seven-times calculation is correct, it tells us only what may happen after an attack has begun. In plain language, if you are attacked on a farm, the attack may be more likely to end in murder than an armed robbery at a home or business elsewhere. It does not mean that a person living or working on a farm is seven times more likely to be murdered.

In May 2024, the Inclusive Society Institute published *Is South Africa Getting Safer? The divide between perception and data-driven evidence*. The paper examined whether public perceptions of crime corresponded with actual crime trends since 1994 and assessed qualitative and quantitative changes in South Africa's policing system. As part of that wider assessment, it used illustrative calculations to place farm attacks and farm murders within the context of national crime rates.

Our study asked a different question: how many people would have to live or work on farms for the recorded number of farm murders to equal South Africa's national murder rate?

There were approximately 56 farm murders annually, while the national murder rate was approximately 45 murders per 100,000 people. At that national rate, 56 murders would be expected in a population of approximately 124,000 people.

Stats SA counted approximately 40,000 commercial farming units. Using only these known commercial units, the break-even calculation produces an average of 3.1 people per unit. In other words, only about three people per commercial farming unit would have to be exposed for the farm-murder rate to equal the national rate.

The calculation in our report using the broader combination of attempted murder and aggravated robbery produced a similar result: approximately four people per commercial farming unit.

South Africa does not, however, have only 40,000 farms. That figure covers identified commercial farming units. The total number of farms and smallholdings is unknown. Using 40,000 units is therefore the most conservative scenario. If the same 56 murders occurred across a larger number of occupied farms and smallholdings, the average number of exposed people required per unit would fall.

At 40,000 units, 3.1 people per unit would be needed to reach the national murder rate. At 80,000 units, the requirement falls to 1.6 people per unit; at 100,000, to 1.2; and at 120,000, to approximately one person per unit. The figures for 80,000, 100,000 and 120,000 are hypothetical illustrations. They are not estimates of the actual number of farms.

A farm attack may therefore be especially dangerous once it occurs. But that is different from the overall probability of being murdered. Even if farm attacks are more lethal, the overall probability of being murdered on a farm appears lower than the national probability, provided that more than approximately 124,000 people live or work across the farms and smallholdings covered by the murder figures - a threshold that is almost certainly exceeded.

The deeper problem is the lack of reliable data. South Africa does not know precisely how many farms and smallholdings it has, how many people live on them or how many people are regularly exposed to crime on them. Without this denominator, an exact farm-attack or farm-murder rate cannot be calculated.

Our study does not pretend to supply this missing information. Instead, it identifies the break-even points: the farm population that would be required for the recorded number of crimes to equal the corresponding national rates. Using only the approximately 40,000 known commercial farming units, the required average is 3.1 people per unit for murder and 3.65 for the broader attack comparison. If the true number of farms and smallholdings is higher, the required average falls further.

All precise claims about comparative farm risk must therefore be properly qualified. The underlying data are too incomplete to support categorical conclusions presented as settled facts. Analysts, campaigners and the media should refrain from sensationalising estimates derived from such fragile datasets, whether their intention is to exaggerate or minimise the danger.

Farm attacks and murders have become a source of intense domestic controversy, international publicity and diplomatic tension. South Africa should know how many farms and smallholdings it has and how many people live and work on them. Improving this data collection is essential if future debate is to rest on reliable evidence rather than assumptions, estimates and competing narratives.

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