Firearm amnesties have been implemented in numerous countries including Angola, Australia, Brazil, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Solomon Islands and even the US. In some contexts complete or “blanket” amnesty from criminal prosecution was provided to those individuals that surrendered firearms and ammunition. In other contexts, only limited amnesty was granted, such as in relation to the crime of illegal possession of firearms and ammunition. Some amnesty processes have also been incentivised, with individuals that surrender firearms and ammunition receiving cash or goods such as bicycles and farming equipment. Cash-based incentive processes have however largely become discredited as they have the potential to encourage a brisker illicit trade in firearms.

Evidence linking firearm amnesties to reductions in violent crime is scarce, largely because there are numerous variables and context-specific factors that contribute to the occurrence and non-occurrence of crime. For example, in 2005 a six month firearm amnesty was implemented throughout South Africa in which approximately 100,000 firearms were collected by the SAPS. Since 2006 there has been a noticeable reduction in recorded firearm-related deaths in South Africa, but this downward trend began in 2001 and has also been linked to other violence-reduction processes initiated by the government and civil society groups. There is a strong possibility that the 2005 amnesty process had a positive impact on reducing firearm deaths, but to date this relationship is very difficult to prove. However, the key impact of firearm amnesties is that they can bring about a major reduction in the number of firearms that can potentially be used to commit crime.

In the case of the current firearm amnesty in South Africa, persons who surrender illegal firearms and ammunition to the SAPS will not be prosecuted for unlawful possession of those firearms and ammunition. Nonetheless, in order to be considered for amnesty, those individuals are required to complete an application form in which they provide the SAPS with their name, identification number, residential address and details of the firearm and ammunition. No immunity for other firearm-related crimes will be provided. For example, if a surrendered firearm is linked to a murder by means of ballistic testing, the individual who surrendered the firearm may be charged with murder. Therefore, it is unlikely that a substantial number of firearms that have been used to commit crimes such as murder, assault and robbery will be surrendered to the police. However, the amnesty process may encourage a significant number of persons who have inherited or acquired firearms that are no longer licensed and that they no longer wish to retain (and hence may be

In January, South African Minister of Police Nathi Mthethwa formally announced the launch of a firearm amnesty period, which will be in place until 11 April 2010. The main aim of the amnesty process is to encourage individuals to surrender any illegal firearms and ammunition in their possession to the South African Police Service.

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continued.

vulnerable to theft) to hand in these firearms to the police.

By implication, this amnesty process also appears to have a secondary objective, namely to provide a relicensing opportunity to those firearm owners that missed the compulsory deadline of 30 June 2009 to renew their firearm licences. Individuals that possess unlicensed firearms (in terms of the Firearms Control Act) have the option of applying for licences for firearms that they surrender to the SAPS. However, such individuals are required to meet stringent competency criteria, which are outlined in the South African Firearms Control Act.