

Why Private Security Is a Booming Industry in South Africa

South Africa made international headlines in March when the government voted to seize land from white farmers without compensation. It is still unclear how the expropriations will proceed. But the vote put South Africa under a negative spotlight. No discussion of the country is complete without a mention of its high and ever-rising crime rate.

I recently moved out of South Africa with my husband and our children. We had spent two years living in Potchefstroom, a small city about a 2-hour-drive from Johannesburg. As an American, many aspects of life in Potchefstroom were different for me. In particular, I was amazed at the way a local security company, Mooirivier Beskerming, functioned as a sort of private police force.

South Africa has one of the world's highest rates of violent crime. Last year an average of 52 people were [murdered](#) there per day. Highly restrictive gun laws make it very difficult to legally own a firearm for self-defense. As a result, many South Africans rely on private security companies. The private security industry in South Africa employs around half a million people. That is more than double the size of the South African Police Service (SAPS).

What is unusual about Mooirivier Beskerming is its ubiquity. In any Potchefstroom neighborhood that is middle class going all the way up to very affluent, nearly every house features a Mooirivier Beskerming logo on their electric fence. One life-long Potchefstroom resident told me he believes at least 75% of the city's white population uses them.

This level of coverage allows Mooirivier Beskerming to play a

significant role in the safety of the city in general, not just clients. I saw their cars out patrolling the streets far more often than I ever saw SAPS cars. Mooirivier Beskerming officers are willing to help people who may not even be clients. They are known to regularly intervene in situations they encounter while on patrol. For example, on April 19, Mooirivier Beskerming posted a Facebook update describing how their staff rescued a woman: "At around 20h30 last night, patrolling reaction officers heard what sounded to them like a female screaming in Forsman street, Industria. The officers started searching abandoned buildings in the area and found a male suspect on top of a female victim, busy assaulting her. The suspect, however, managed to run away as soon as he spotted the officers."

South Africans have little faith in their official police. Everyone I spoke to told me they consider reporting crimes to be a waste of time. If they bother to do it all, they consider it a formality and do not expect the perpetrator to be caught. A national [survey](#) indicated that only 57% of home burglaries are reported to SAPS.

Moorivier Beskerming is affordable. A basic package can start for as little as \$25 per month. And the quality of their service is very high. I only heard good things about them from their customers. One of my friends lives in a fairly isolated house. One night she had to drive home alone very late. She called Moorivier Beskerming for a patrol car to come and follow her up to her house and watch till she got inside safely.

Jan Venter, senior lecturer at North-West University which is based in Potchefstroom, says their staff comes out even when it is clear there is nothing amiss. "We get false alarms because of the neighborhood cats. But that's part of Moorivier's great service. They come out anyway," he says. "Their guys search the property with flashlights. "

Despite Mooirivier Beskerming's dominance, other private security companies from the nearby big cities are trying to gain a foothold in the Potchefstroom market. The rate and severity of crime is rising in Potchefstroom. The city has historically been much safer than many other places in South Africa, but the national trends are starting to catch up. This past month, a group of men in a car attempted to abduct an 18-year-old-girl from a public street in broad daylight. A few days later, a 21-year-old college student was shot while walking home. A decade ago, crimes like this were highly unusual in Potchefstroom but now they are becoming regular occurrences.

Interestingly, some Mooirivier Beskerming clients are under the impression that patrol officers only carry pepper spray. This is not true. A spokesman confirmed to me via email that they carry firearms. "We, intentionally, do not advertise our capabilities as (according to us) it might put our officers at risk," he wrote. As crime in Potchefstroom rises, they made need to make a more decisive show of force.

South Africa is a country beset by problems. The demand for private security is only going to rise in the foreseeable future. My experiences in Potchefstroom showed me that, while companies like Mooirivier Beskerming cannot solve the country's problems, they do go a long way towards making life more bearable for ordinary citizens.

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