



# PRISON BREAK

By [Kotie Geldenhuys](#); Photos courtesy of [Freepik](#) and [Unsplash](#)

The dramatic escape of Thabo Bester, dubbed the "Facebook rapist," from prison reminded us of the American television series "Prison Break". Yet, his escape has brought attention to the flaws and corruption within the Department of Correctional Services (DCS). These weaknesses allow numerous convicted and awaiting trial detainees to break out of incarceration. Escaping from correctional centres is a serious concern for prison authorities and the community, not only because it poses a risk to public safety, but also because it undermines the justice system's credibility and can result in further criminal activity.

While prison escapes are not uncommon in South Africa, the Bester escape garnered significant attention. Bester, who was serving a life sentence for murder and rape at the Mangaung Correctional Centre in the Free State, which is under the management of the G4S security company, reportedly died in his cell during the early hours of 3 May 2022. Initially, the DCS stated that Bester had taken his own life by setting himself on fire in his cell. However, an investigation by the news agency [GroundUp](#) revealed that the body discovered in the cell was not that of Bester, necessitating questions of where he was. Police began investigating the case as a

murder after a post-mortem revealed that the burnt body showed signs of blunt force trauma to the head before it had been set alight. The DCS also confirmed that DNA analysis with an individual identified as Bester's mother failed to establish a familial relationship, further confirming Bester's possible escape from the correctional centre (Nonyane, 2023).

During a meeting held on 18 October 2022, the SAPS informed the DCS and the Judicial Inspectorate of Correctional Services (JICS) that Thabo Bester had escaped from Mangaung Correctional Centre on 3 May 2022. Six days later, Justice Edwin Cameron, the Inspecting Judge for Correctional Services, wrote to Mr Ronald Lamola, who was the Minister of Correctional Services at the time, stating: "There are indications that, with the collusion of G4S employees and others, a fire was deliberately set in Thabo Bester's single cell, and a corpse was smuggled into the cell to fake Bester's death and aid in his escape." This information was disclosed in documents provided to the Parliamentary Committee on Correctional Services in April 2023 by G4S, DCS, SAPS and JICS (Steyn and Damons, 2023).

In April 2023, **GroundUp** presented a timeline illustrating the slowness of the authorities to investigate the Bester case. This timeline also explained the premeditation involved in the escape (Steyn and Damons, 2023). Brent Parker, a retired Correctional Services officer and former associate director of a training academy for prison guards in the USA who frequently interacts with inmates, explains that planning an escape takes significant time, which inmates typically have in abundance (The Atlantic, 2018). In the case of Thabo Bester, the planning had been underway for some time before a vehicle was driven into the facility without proper authorisation on 29 April 2022. The following day, Bester was transferred to a single cell after his application was granted - purportedly for his own safety. Although the application was approved by G4S, it had not been sanctioned by the DCS controller. On 3 May 2022, Bester was reported dead after a fire erupted in his cell, which G4S and DCS labelled as suicide. The post-mortem conducted on the body found in the cell revealed that the deceased had died prior to the fire. On 5 May 2022, the JICS initiated an investigation into the unnatural death of Thabo Bester. The following day, 6 May 2022, Dr Nandipha Magudumana retrieved Bester's "body" from a Free State morgue and transported it to a Soweto mortuary. That same day, SAPS commenced a murder investigation after they received the post-mortem report. On 13 May 2022, the SAPS seized the body from Magudumana's custody, but on 19 May 2022, she petitioned the Pretoria High Court for the return of the body, claiming to be Bester's customary law wife (Steyn and Damons, 2023).

This was not the first time that inmates serving extended terms in correctional centres across South Africa have effectively pulled a Houdini act on the country's justice system. Noteworthy prison breaks in South Africa include the following:

- Ananias Mathe, who gained notoriety as the first inmate to successfully break free from the highly secure C-Max Correctional Centre in Pretoria on 18 November 2006. Following Mathe's escape, accounts indicated that the "Houdini" stripped down and applied petroleum jelly all over his body to manoeuvre through a

window measuring 20 cm by 60 cm (Mail & Guardian, 2006). It was later revealed that he orchestrated his getaway by bribing officials with R80 000. Once the money was handed over, warders unlocked the handcuffs and leg irons of the man who had been labelled by police as an "ultimate career criminal" to set him free from the C-Max Correctional Centre in Pretoria. The bribe was apparently paid to warders by four members of Mathe's gang who had raised the money in the village of Xicumbane in the Xai Xai district of Mozambique where he lived with his two wives and five children. Mathe led a cross-border crime syndicate operating from Xicumbane, orchestrating raids into South Africa from this base. The Correctional Services Committee of Parliament dismissed a report in 2007, which proposed that Mathe had manoeuvred through the window and crossed the prison roof. In 2009, it was reported that six warders were dismissed for aiding Mathe's escape (Times Live, 2016). In December 2006, he was shot, injured and re-arrested in Tembisa on the East Rand of Gauteng, following the theft of a vehicle equipped with a tracking device from a residence in Craighall Park (Mail and Guardian, 2006). Mathe passed away in 2016 at King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban following an extended illness (Times Live, 2016).

- In April 2018, Nkosiyazi Phungula, who was accused of the murder of businessman Werner Josef Peherchtold and his associate Johann Botha at the Zebra Inn in Jeppestown in June 2017, escaped from the Johannesburg Correctional Centre, also known as Sun City. He was part of a group of 16 detainees awaiting trial who escaped using a pipe shaft and breaking through a wall in the Medium B section of the correctional centre (Malofha, 2018). Shortly after, two of the escapees were fatally shot by the Hawks in KwaZulu-Natal after they opened fire on the police (The Witness, 2018).
- On 9 December 2020, Muyambo Zacharia Thabo who was serving a life sentence after having been found guilty on 21 criminal charges including rape, robbery and kidnapping, along with Johannes Chauke, who was serving a 20-year sentence for house-breaking, escaped from Pretoria's Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre by creating a hole in the wall of their cell (Sifile, 2020). Thabo, along with another individual, was re-arrested in March 2024 in Limpopo for possession of an unlicensed hunting rifle and ten rounds of ammunition after authorities had noticed a suspicious vehicle near rhino farms in Mookgopong (Naboomspruit). It was established that the individual who identified himself as "Thomas Chauke" was in fact the fugitive Muyambo Zacharia Thabo. Thabo had previously been arrested in October 2021 in Nietverdiend, North West Province, for involvement in rhino poaching. Despite being in custody, he managed to escape while being transported to court. In May 2023, Thabo was once again arrested for possession of an unlicensed firearm in Melmoth, KwaZulu-Natal, only to flee during his court appearance (SAPS, 2024).
- On 18 October 2022, at approximately 04:00, seven high-risk inmates fled from the Waainek Correctional Centre in Makanda, Eastern Cape, by exiting through a window. The only South African among them was Luvuyo September, who faced charges including murder, attempted murder, kidnapping and robbery. The others,

Bennet Kwarrie, Simba Masinga, Trymore Chauke, Nhamo Muyambo, Abraham Moyane and Francis Chitiyo, were Zimbabwean nationals detained for involvement in rhino poaching (Plaatjies, 2022). Later that day, Bennet Kwarrie was apprehended in Bloemfontein, followed by the re-arrest of Simba Masinga the following day in the bush near Committees Drift (Amner, 2022). In April 2023, Nhamo Muyambo was re-arrested at a private game reserve near Makhanda while in possession of hunting equipment (Tshikalange, 2023).

Prison breaks such as those described carry substantial ramifications for both society and law enforcement. Escaped inmates represent a notable risk to public safety and security, potentially engaging in additional criminal activity, violence or intimidation while evading capture. Such incidents also strain law enforcement resources and budgets significantly, necessitating increased allocation of manpower and funds for pursuit and recapture efforts. These escapes can further tarnish the reputation and trustworthiness of the correctional system by revealing vulnerabilities and deficiencies in its security protocols and management practices (Reed, 2023).

## How big is the problem?

In the DCS's annual report for the 2021/2022 financial year, the Department revealed that 22 inmates managed to escape from various correctional centres across the country. The report highlighted that it was the lowest recorded number in the preceding 27 years. By the end of that financial year, 13 out of the 22 escapees had been rearrested. Comparatively, in the preceding financial year of 2020/2021, there were 117 escapes, and in the year before that, 34 inmates broke out of correctional centres (Department of Correctional Services, 2022). According to Mr Singabakho Nxumalo, the communication officer of the DCS, the figure of 117 was due to a mass escape of 68 inmates in one incident on 24 July 2020 from the Malmesbury Correctional Centre and although most were rearrested soon afterwards, this incident still had to be classified and recorded as an escape (SABC, 2023). For the 2022/2023 financial year, there were 27 escapes recorded (Department of Correctional Services, 2023). Despite the overall decrease in escapes, Mr Ronald Lamola, the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services noted in July 2023, in response to parliamentary questions, that a total of 256 inmates had escaped lawful custody between 2018 and 2023, of whom 208 had been re-arrested during the same period (Maghina, 2023). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that even though the DCS has reported a decrease in escapes, each escape poses a significant risk, considering that many of these individuals who had either been convicted or are awaiting trial for violent crimes, were returning to society illegally.

## Corruption

The Thabo Bester case has raised serious questions about prison security and the involvement of officials in facilitating escapes. A question that needs to be answered is what motivates these officials to engage in such corrupt behaviour? What is the primary driving factor to the overwhelming number of inmates who escape: inadequate staffing, intimidation or financial gain?

Correctional centres serve as microcosms of society, fostering interactions between inmates and staff. Conversations often revolve around personal matters such as family or the daily challenges faced by inmates and warders. Mr Parker emphasised the importance of warders maintaining a professional demeanour, cautioning against overly familiar relationships with inmates to avoid potential pitfalls. According to Michele Y Deitch, USA prison culture expert, inmates typically seek out trustworthy accomplices when planning escapes, highlighting the complexity of inmate-staff relationships (The Atlantic, 2018).

Regarding the ratio of inmates to warders, Mr Ronald Lamola disclosed in the national legislature in June 2022 that South Africa houses approximately 160 000 inmates in (Xako, 2023) 243 correctional centres, operating within an approved bed space capacity of 107 582 (Felix, 2023). These correctional centres are overseen by a staff complement of 34 000. Overcrowding of many of these centres exacerbates the situation. Since the abolition of the death penalty in 1997, crimes that previously carried the death sentence are now punishable by a life sentence which led to a staggering 4000% increase in life sentences between 1995 and 2022 (Prison Insider, 2023).

This dire situation is exacerbated by the low remuneration of DCS employees - especially to essential employees such as warders and frontline officials who receive the lowest salaries. Adding to the challenge, the DCS implemented the seven-day shift system in 2007, which replaced the previous overtime system and significantly reduced the income of most warders. This resulted in many warders being forced to seek additional income through various means, such as operating informal bars or taxi services, borrowing from loan sharks or even engaging in contraband smuggling into correctional centres to supplement their earnings. The proliferation of cellphones has facilitated smuggling and coordination of criminal activities within correctional centres, despite attempts by the DCS to install cellphone-blocking technology in some facilities. Despite regulations prohibiting possession of money, many inmates receive funds through mobile transfers, which they use for bribery. The prevalence of violence and intimidation within South African correctional centres has deterred potential whistle-blowers from reporting criminal activities, further exacerbating the situation. Poor working conditions and limited career advancement opportunities have contributed to low staff morale and apathy among correctional centre officials, creating a toxic work environment where senior managers are disconnected from the realities on the ground. This disconnect was evident when senior Correctional Services officials were caught off-guard by revelations that Bester had escaped in May 2022. The seven-day shift system has further resulted in fewer warders working weekends, leaving inadequate supervision over inmates, which increases the opportunities for smuggling illegal items into correctional centres (Xako, 2023). (Also refer to an article published in [Servamus](#): June 2024 about drug smuggling in correctional centres.)

The widespread practice of money changing hands between warders and inmates, commonly referred to as "ukumokola," is a poorly kept secret even among the highest authorities in correctional centres



(Xako, 2023). In the case of Annanias Mathe, as detailed earlier in the article, it came to light that he managed to escape with the assistance of warders after paying a bribe of R80 000 (Times Live, 2016). Similarly, in the Thabo Bester case, it is alleged that he paid R5 million to at least nine warders who aided in his escape. The payments were made in cash over time, approximately R500 000 each, with the orchestrator, Senohe Matsoara, pocketing R1 million (Wa Afrika, 2023). Senohe Matsoara, a former G4S official, was apprehended on 9 April 2023 (Steyn and Damons, 2023). Despite being off-duty on the night of Bester's escape, Matsoara surprisingly reported to work (Wa Afrika, 2023) and was assigned to Bester's cell block on the night of the fire (Steyn and Damons, 2023).

Justice Edwin Cameron, the Inspecting Judge overseeing our correctional system, noted that he believes that collusion, which might even have reached the highest levels, played a role in Bester's escape. Singabakho Nxumalo of the DCS agreed that there is typically some form of assistance, either internal or external, in every escape. Mr Nxumalo further explained that those actively aiding an inmate's escape not only face dismissal but also criminal charges for facilitating the escape (SABC, 2023). One such an example happened in April 2018 when two warders were arrested for allegedly aiding Nkosiyazi Phungula (mentioned earlier in this article) and his 15 accomplices in escaping from the Johannesburg Correctional Centre (Gous, 2018).

## Methods of escape

Inmates use diverse ways to escape depending on the conditions of their incarceration and the security measures of the facility. Some escapes are meticulously planned and enacted over an extended duration, whereas others occur spontaneously where inmates take advantage of opportunities. Violence or weapons may be involved in some escapes, while some inmates rely on stealth or deceit. Some escapees receive assistance from external parties, while others are committed solo.

**Containment penetration** refers to the strategy of breaking or bypassing the physical barriers of a correctional centre, such as fences, walls, gates or doors. This typically involves using tools such as wire cutters, ropes or ladders to climb over or cut through fences or walls. Inmates may also take advantage of gaps, holes or weaknesses in the perimeter to squeeze through or crawl underneath them (Reed, 2023). Escape methods can include cutting through sturdy bars. Mr Nxumalo highlighted that the DCS mandates regular inspections, almost daily, to assess the structural integrity of facilities and ensure that bars remain securely attached (SABC, 2023).

In March 2022 four dangerous inmates escaped from the Rooigrond Correctional Centre, near Mahikeng in North West province. Zacharia Francisco Nyalimate, a Mozambican serving a 27-year sentence for housebreaking and murder; Alfred Gwambe, also Mozambican, serving a 65-year sentence for housebreaking, theft and possession of a stolen vehicle; Siyabonga Sithole, a South African serving a life sentence for rape, theft and housebreaking; and Edward Madiba, a South African serving a 15-year sentence for robbery and illegal possession of a firearm, broke a cell window and used bedding sheets to lower

themselves down from a height. Authorities struggled to determine exactly about how the men managed to escape from the high-perimeter fence (Pijoo, 2022).

Using **physical force** involves using violence or weapons to overpower warders to escape from correctional centres. This typically includes assaulting or threatening warders with fists, knives, guns or explosives and seizing their keys, uniforms or vehicles. Inmates may initiate riots, disturbances or fires to create disruption to make their escape amid the turmoil (Reed, 2023). This is what happened on 24 July 2020, shortly after noon, when 68 remand detainees managed to escape from the Malmesbury Correctional Centre. They escaped by overpowering warders during exercise time, confiscated keys, locked three warders in a cell, unlocked other cells and fled through the main entrance and over the roof. During the incident, nine officials sustained minor injuries and bruises. Of the 68 escapees, 66 were re-arrested soon after their escape (South African Government, 2020). In another incident on 14 August 2020, Khanyiso Dlali, Lundi Mzimkhulu and Sibusiso Nzuzo escaped from Whittlesea Correctional Services. During this event, warders were busy securing the prison doors after inmates returned from exercise. When they heard knocking at the door, they opened it and witnessed a scuffle between inmates and warders. One inmate forcefully disarmed a warder of his service pistol whereafter the warders were held at gunpoint and ordered to surrender keys, cellphones and uniforms. The inmates then locked the warders in a restroom before fleeing. A manhunt ensued, leading to their recapture three months later. In March 2024, Dlali was convicted of one count of escaping from lawful custody and sentenced to five years' incarceration. Mzimkhulu and Nzuzo were each sentenced to 15 years' incarceration for robbery with aggravated circumstances and an additional eight years' incarceration each for escaping lawful custody. Consequently, they will serve a total of 15 years each behind bars, as both sentences will run concurrently (Menzelwa, 2024).

**Deception** involves using disguises, fake documents or similar strategies to outsmart authorities and evade confinement. This often entails assuming the guise of warders, personnel, visitors or fellow inmates and leveraging their credentials, uniforms or identities to slip out of correctional centre undetected. Some inmates may use falsified documents, such as court orders, release forms or transfer notices, to persuade officials of their lawful entitlement to exit the correctional centre (Reed, 2023). In the Thabo Bester incident, he exited the Mangaung Correctional Centre wearing a G4S uniform (Sithole, 2023).

**Failure to return** is a tactic used by individuals to evade incarceration after they had been temporarily released, such as for a work



release or parole. This typically entails breaching the conditions of the release, such as failing to report back to the correctional centre, disregarding requirements such as wearing an electronic monitor or exceeding prescribed geographical boundaries. Some inmates may exploit their release to orchestrate a more permanent escape, which could involve acquiring counterfeit identities, passports or means of transportation (Reed, 2023).

The act of **escaping from outside** refers to the method used by inmates to break free from custody while being transported or escorted outside the correctional centre, such as for court appearances, medical treatment or other reasons. This typically involves using tools, weapons or physical force to overcome restraints, warders or vehicles either during transit or upon arrival at the destination. Some inmates may resort to tactics such as deception, bribery or collaboration to persuade or manipulate authorities or accomplices into facilitating their escape during transportation or escort (Reed, 2023). This is what happened when Alex Nkomo, who was part of a cable theft syndicate, successfully fled police custody in March 2023 while en route to court in Makhado, Limpopo. During the journey, an armed group reportedly fired shots, enabling Nkomo and six other awaiting trial inmates to evade capture. Similarly, notorious serial killer Bonga Ntuli from KwaMashu, KwaZulu-Natal, managed to evade police custody while being transported to the Durban Magistrates' Court. Ntuli was arrested hours later following his escape (Nonyane, 2023).

Escape with **help from the outside** entails breaking out of a correctional centre with the aid of sources beyond its walls, such as family, friends, accomplices or corrupt officials. This typically includes obtaining tools, weapons, information or transportation from outside the facility, often through smuggling, communication or coordination (Reed, 2023). In the Thabo Bester case, he allegedly received assistance both from within and outside the correctional centre. It is claimed that Dr Nandipha Magudumana and her father, Zolile Cornelius Sekeleni, aided Thabo Bester in his escape from the correctional centre.

**Assistance from within** the correctional centre involves inmates potentially receiving aid from sources inside the facility, including warders, staff or other inmates who may be influenced through bribery, blackmail or coercion to assist in their escape. This aspect, notably the involvement of corrupt warders, has been previously discussed in this article. However, collaboration with other inmates can also facilitate escape attempts. One such an example is that of Richard Matt who orchestrated an escape plan in 2015 from the Clinton Correctional Centre in Dannemora, New York, recruiting the support of fellow inmate David Sweat (The Atlantic, 2018).

## Factors contributing to escapes

The factors contributing to escapes from correctional centres are multifaceted. While issues such as inadequate maintenance, substandard infrastructure, smuggling and lax enforcement of regulations by correctional centre staff have been identified as internal causes (Maqhina, 2023), external influences also play a significant role. Events such as impending transfers, news of family illnesses or

relationship troubles can serve as triggers for escape attempts. One hypothesis suggests that inmates may flee to address family issues, especially if there is a considerable distance between where they are incarcerated and their home (Nunze, 2019).

Beyond physical distance, the psychological impact of confinement is profound. The loss of freedom extends beyond restricted movement as it entails isolation from society, loved ones and familiar routines. The involuntary separation from one's former life exacerbates this sense of loss. The loss of autonomy within the correctional centre environment, where basic daily activities such as personal hygiene and mealtimes are dictated, strips inmates of control over their own lives (Nunze, 2019).

## Preventing escapes

The DCS has implemented specific measures aimed at preventing escapes. Strategies to prevent prison breaks typically entail a blend of security tactics such as regular cell inspections, surveillance technology, fortified perimeter barriers, electronic monitoring, manned guard posts, stringent protocols for inmate supervision and mobility (SABC, 2023). Advancements in technology such as biometric identification and GPS tracking should also be considered to bolster security measures and diminish the chances of escape.

In May 2023, Mr Lamola highlighted several initiatives undertaken to reinforce prison security, including the vigilance in monitoring gang activity, safeguarding whistle-blowers/informants and conducting daily searches of cells, bars, windows, inmates, as well as staff, contractors and visitors, with all findings meticulously recorded. Mr Lamola also emphasised ongoing training for staff to identify and profile gangs, sustained monitoring of escape prevention strategies, efforts to alleviate overcrowding and initiatives to keep inmates engaged through sports, recreation and social services (Maqhina, 2023).

Nonetheless, despite these efforts, those inmates who are determined, may still resort to innovative methods to attempt escape, necessitating continued vigilance and adherence to strict protocols governing inmate movement and interaction.



Ensuring that inmates do not escape is a fundamental aspect of correctional centre management. Escaping from a correctional centre is a serious offence and involves significant risks for the inmate and the public while it also undermines the justice system's integrity and the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts. Despite various measures, escapes still occur, often due to lapses in security procedures, human error or the ingenuity of determined inmates. Therefore, continuous evaluation and improvement of security measures are essential to minimise the risk of escapes and enhance overall safety of prisons. One prison break is one too many.

## Editor's note

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