

# PROJECT INSIGHT

## Family Gun Violence in the European Union

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### KEY FINDINGS

- Most European Union (EU) member states show relatively low and stable levels of family homicide. Nevertheless, a significant number of women are regularly and disproportionately victimized in incidents of firearm- and non-firearm-related family violence.
- Firearms have certain characteristics that make them a convenient modus operandi in some specific constellations of family violence.
- Firearms can allow a family member to overpower a physically stronger opponent in family conflicts, which may explain their appeal to adolescents, women, and elderly family members.
- Incidents of family gun violence involve legally held firearms more than those sourced from a criminal milieu, suggesting that firearms trafficking and the illicit gun market play a less important role in this context. The analysis of a randomized sample size of media reports in the EU further indicates that there is little evidence to suggest that these guns tend to be illegally held.
- A firearm is often the weapon of choice in familicide-suicides, despite their low prevalence rate.

## Acknowledgements

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## Abbreviations

EU	European Union
GBD	Global Burden of Disease
IPH	Intimate partner homicide
IPHS	Intimate partner homicide–suicide
IPV	Intimate partner violence
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime

## Introduction

Family violence is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that impacts not only its victims but also their families and communities. Despite the dominant perception that family violence mostly affects women, anyone can be a victim, regardless of their age, race, gender, sexual orientation, faith, or class. This type of violence can take many different forms and can be psychological, physical, economic, or sexual in nature.<sup>1</sup>

Family violence encompasses several different relational constellations, and definitions in literature on the phenomenon are contentious. For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions are applied:

- **Family violence<sup>a</sup>** refers to “any threatening, coercive, dominating, or abusive behaviour that occurs between people in a family, domestic or intimate relationship, or former intimate relationship that causes the person experiencing the behaviour to feel fear”.<sup>2</sup> Neighbours, roommates, friends, and acquaintances are not included in this definition.
- **Intimate partner violence (IPV)** refers to “behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm”.<sup>3</sup> When this behaviour has a lethal outcome, it is referred to as intimate partner homicide (IPH). If that homicide is followed by the suicide of the perpetrator, the term intimate partner homicide–suicide (IPHS) is used. The definition of IPV is therefore narrower than that of family violence.<sup>b</sup>

Even the subcategory of IPV is not as straightforward as the generalizations used by many international studies on the phenomenon, pushing the dual perception of the male as perpetrator and the female as victim. According to Johnson, IPV is not

a This paper does not use the term “domestic violence” since this is most commonly used as synonymous with intimate partner violence (IPV).

b “Homicide” is a legal term that, despite the etymology of the word, refers to the killing of a man or a woman. Many victims of IPH, however, are women. “Femicide” is a more recent term that specifies the killing of a woman.

a unitary phenomenon and can be divided into four categories, based on “the extent to which the perpetrator and his or her partner use violence to attempt to control the relationship”:<sup>4</sup>

- **Intimate terrorism** refers to when the perpetrator uses violence to exert general control over his or her partner, but the partner does not.
- **Violent resistance** refers to when the partner is violent and controlling—an intimate terrorist—and the resister’s violence arises in reaction to that attempt to exert general control.
- **Mutual violent control** refers to when both members of the couple use violence in attempts to gain general control over their partner.
- **Situational couple violence** refers to when the perpetrator is violent (and his or her partner may be as well), but neither of them uses violence to attempt to exert general control.<sup>5</sup>

Using this typology makes it possible to step away from the generalization that the perpetrators of IPV are men and the victims are women; however, it is difficult to obtain data that allows IPV cases to be characterized according to this typology. This is mainly due to the under-reporting of these types of incidents by women and men alike as well as the lack of a uniform registration system.

This paper also uses the following terms:

- **Familicide<sup>a</sup>** is the attempted or completed killing of multiple family members.<sup>6</sup>
- **Parricide/matricide** is the attempted or completed killing of one or more parents.<sup>7</sup>
- **Filicide** is the attempted or completed killing of a child by its father or mother.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The author specified “attempted or completed”.

- **Homicide–suicide** is a homicide that is followed by the (attempted) suicide of the perpetrator.<sup>9</sup>

One crucial element that increases the lethality of family violence is the presence of a firearm. In addition to increasing the likelihood of a deadly outcome, firearms also have certain specific characteristics that make them a convenient modus operandi in some cases of family violence (see below).<sup>10</sup> Having a firearm readily accessible in the home is an important risk factor as studies show a strong association between family ownership of firearms and an increased risk of homicide at the hands of a spouse, family member, or intimate partner as well as suicide.<sup>11</sup>

While the majority of studies on family gun violence are based on US data, this paper aims to provide an overview of family gun violence in the EU. Comprehensive and comparable (official) data on firearm violence in the EU is scarce, however. In addition, the data that is available is often not disaggregated in a way that identifies the specific context of the firearm-related violent incident. As a result, systematically comparing data between EU countries is currently very difficult.

This paper applies a mixed-method approach, combining a literature review, open-source data and analyses, media articles, and case studies to improve the intelligence picture on the characteristics of family firearm violence in the EU. More specifically, the paper focuses on the motivations family violence perpetrators may have for using a firearm, as the specific characteristics of this modus operandi can help overcome some of the barriers inherent to killing people with whom they have a close relationship, such as intimate partners, children, or parents.

The literature review is mainly based on US data—as mentioned earlier—with a focus on reports and journal articles that discuss perpetrator and victim profiles, as well as the specific motivations for using a firearm. Because of issues related to

under-reporting, the data presented in this paper is mainly based on information on homicides rather than on injuries and/or threats. However, this paper does not solely focus on fatal or non-fatal cases but tries to provide a more general overview of family gun violence in the EU. The intentional homicide data used in this paper is sourced from Eurostat and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The data on the incidence of firearm violence in the EU is obtained from the 2019 Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study, which was published in *The Lancet* in 2020 by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.<sup>12</sup> The data was gathered from “hospitals, governments, surveys and other databases around the world” to “produce regular estimates of all-cause mortality, deaths by cause, years of life lost due to premature mortality (YLLs), years lived with disability (YLDs), and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs)”.<sup>13</sup> This data must, however, be interpreted with caution, since the exact context of these incidents is not reported and not every injury related to gun violence leads to the victim seeking medical help (and the incident being registered in health records).

The media articles discussed throughout the paper illustrate how the general findings in the literature review could relate to the European context. In order to apply a more focused approach, the following seven EU countries with differing firearm homicide rates were selected (based on the data portrayed in a study on firearm violence and trafficking in Europe): three countries with a high firearm homicide rate (Latvia: 0.4, Croatia: 0.36, and Malta: 0.5); two countries with a medium firearm homicide rate (Belgium: 0.18 and Austria: 0.18); and two countries with a low firearm homicide rate (Romania: 0.04 and Spain: 0.1).<sup>14</sup> Using the Gunviolence.eu – Incident Monitor (hereafter

"the Incident Monitor"), a database of 4,945 media articles on firearm violence was established.<sup>a</sup> These articles were manually coded based on their context (family related or not), and duplicates were removed. This process resulted in the identification of a total of 243 cases of family-related incidents of firearm violence that occurred between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2022.<sup>b</sup> It is important to note that these cases comprise not only homicides, but also injuries and threats. Further investigations on reporting on the legal status of the firearm(s) used in incidents was undertaken for a randomized subset of 40 articles.<sup>c</sup>

The first section of this paper discusses family homicide in the EU, noting that, as is the case in many other regions of the world, this type of violence is marked by the disproportionate victimization of women. The section goes on to examine the incidence of firearm violence in the EU and specifically female victimization as an indicator of family violence.

The second section of this paper focuses on firearm characteristics and why they may appeal as a modus operandi for certain types of family violence and perpetrator profiles. The paper concludes by summarizing the main findings and implications of the study.

## Family violence in the EU

This section provides a general overview of family homicide and the use of firearms in the EU. Portraying an accurate picture of the phenomenon is challenging: non-lethal family violence is frequently under-reported in official statistics as

a The Incident Monitor ([www.gunviolence.eu/incident-monitor](http://www.gunviolence.eu/incident-monitor)) aims to collect media articles on firearm-related violence in all EU member states. It processes data in real time through an automated system that uses artificial intelligence. For more detailed information on the development and functioning of the Monitor, consult the methodological report: Cops, D., De Schutter, A. & De Smedt, T. (2023), Gunviolence.eu – Incident Monitor: Methodological report, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, <https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/en/project-insight/#methodologicalreport>.

b The number of cases by country are as follows: Austria (n=63), Belgium (n=62), Spain (n=74), Croatia (n=25), Latvia (n=0), Malta (n=1), and Romania (n=18).

c Due to limited time and resources only a subset of 40 articles were analysed instead of the complete dataset.

well as media articles, since victims of this type of abuse often choose not to disclose the true nature of their injuries to others, such as medical personnel or law enforcement. According to survey data compiled by UN Women, less than 40 per cent of women who experience violence seek any form of help.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, male victimization of domestic abuse is often less likely to be recognised than that of women, as male victims are less likely to report such incidents for fear of embarrassment or ridicule and owing to the lack of available support services.<sup>16</sup>

The first part of the section discusses family-related homicide in the EU and the prevalence of female victimization, despite a lack of data on the share of firearm usage in these incidents. The second part examines the incidence of firearm

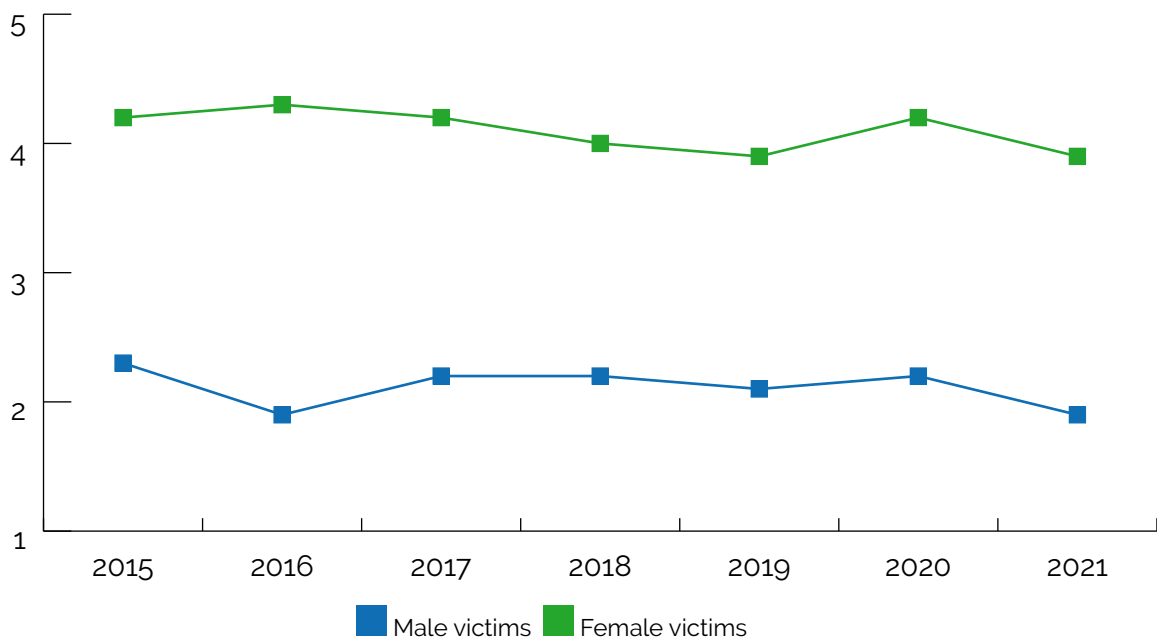
violence in the EU countries, although the data does not distinguish between the contexts in which the incidents took place. Bringing together both data sources, the paper seeks to, carefully, identify which countries could account for high levels of family-related firearm violence.

Less than 40 per cent of women who experience violence seek any form of help, while male victimization of domestic abuse is often even less likely to be recognised due to severe underreporting.

## Family-related homicide and female victimization

Women are disproportionately victimized in cases of family violence. The EU rate of female victims of intentional homicide killed by family members or intimate partners in 2021 was 3.9 (per million women), whereas the rate of male victims was half of that (1.8 per million men).<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 1** Male and female victims of intentional homicide perpetrated by a family member or intimate partner, per one million inhabitants, 2015-21



Source: Eurostat (2023)<sup>18</sup>

Although the rate of victimization of both sexes decreased compared to the previous year, the decrease in male victimization is a lot steeper than female victimization (17 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively).

According to the UNODC report on homicides, one in five homicides at the global level are committed by an intimate partner or another family member.<sup>19</sup> The vast majority of the victims of these homicides are women. Globally, more than half (58 per cent) of women who were intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by their intimate partner or another family member.<sup>20</sup> More than a third of these women were killed by a former or current intimate partner. With an intimate partner/family-related homicide rate of 0.7 per 100 000 women, Europe is the region where women run the lowest risk of being killed within the domestic setting.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, domestic violence and domestic homicide remains a crucial topic both at the global and the EU level and should be considered a health problem that needs to be addressed as such.

In Belgium, for example, the police recorded approximately 28,000 cases of physical violence in the domestic sphere. Of these cases, 75 per cent occurred among partners and 25 per cent involved other family members. About 90 per cent of the suspected perpetrators in these cases were men. Based on health survey data from the Institute for Gender and Equality from 2013, it appears that approximately 70 per cent of victims of domestic violence are women.<sup>22</sup>

The UNODC database (see Figure 2) gathers data from national authorities through the UN Crime Trends Survey, as well as from the “most reliable

sources available”.<sup>23</sup> The data is then sent to the UN member states for review and validation.

One of the key conclusions that can be drawn from this data is that the prevalence of victims of intentional homicide in the domestic sphere differs significantly between EU member states. While some countries, such as Latvia and Lithuania, appear to show high rates of family homicide, other EU countries, such as Greece, Spain, and Italy, report comparatively lower rates of family-related homicide.

The data further supports the general findings from previous studies<sup>24</sup> indicating that women are

disproportionally victimized in incidents of family homicide, especially when the perpetrator is an intimate partner. Consistent with studies based on predominantly US data, it appears that the proportion of male victims in family homicides in the EU tends to be higher in cases involving “family members” compared with those involving “intimate partners”.<sup>25</sup> This means that when men are victimized in the domestic context, the perpetrator is more likely to be another family member than an intimate partner. Conversely, the data suggests that Estonia, Lithuania, and Slovakia may be an exception to this rule as the rate of male IPH victimization is higher than that of female IPH victimization in these countries. It should be noted, however, that the ratio of male versus female victims is very likely the result of policy interventions rather than the real proportion of victimization.

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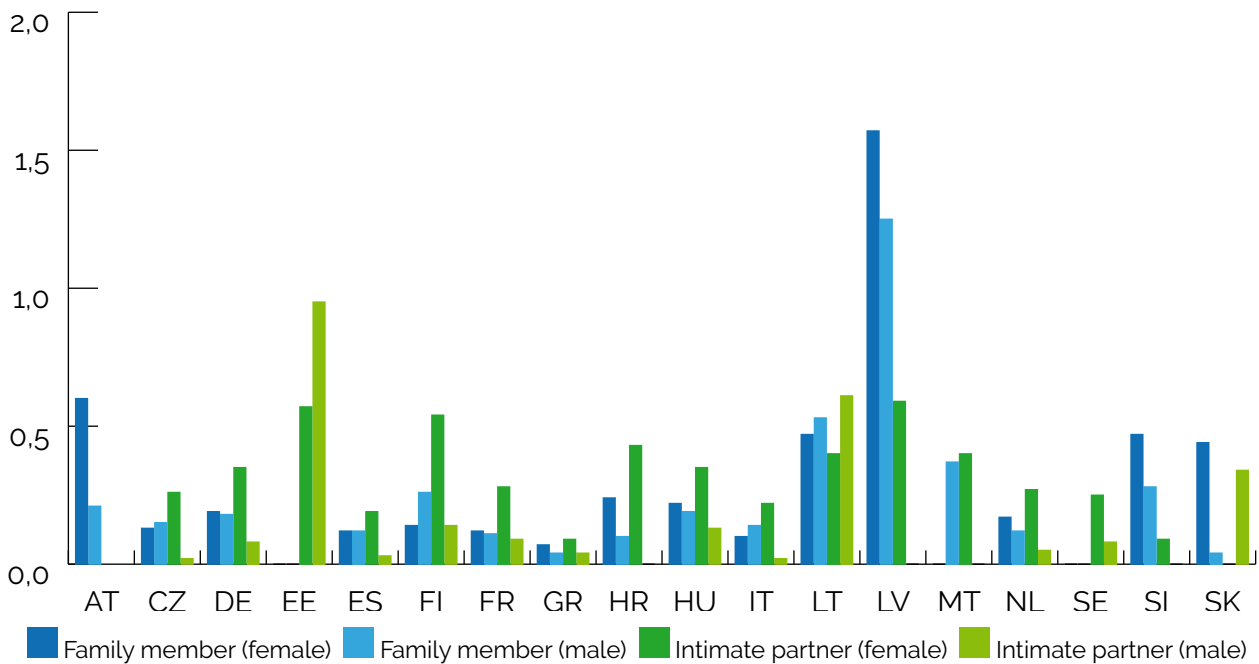


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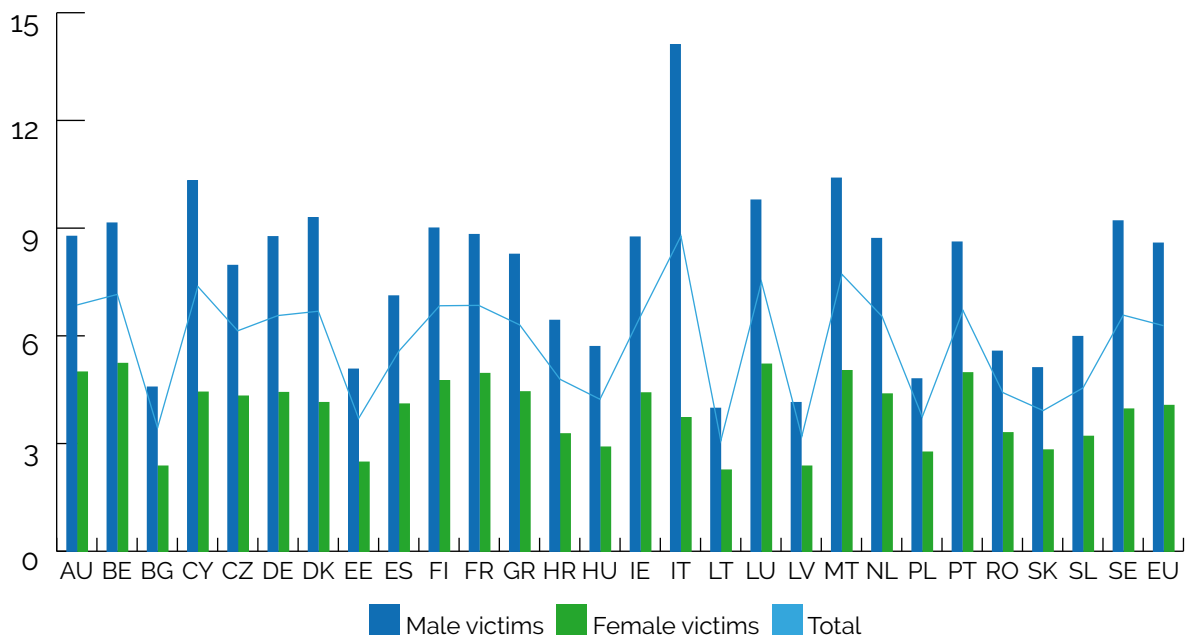
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Figure 2 Victims of intentional homicide in the domestic sphere, per 100,000 inhabitants<sup>ab</sup>



Source: UNODC (n.d.)<sup>26</sup>

Figure 3 Incidence rate of physical violence by firearm in the EU in 2019, per 100,000 inhabitants



Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (2023)<sup>27</sup>

- a This data is sourced from the UNODC database for the year 2020, with the exception of Finland, for which 2019 data was the most recent available. No UNODC data was available for Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, or Romania. The data for Austria only addresses family member victims. For Sweden, only data on intimate partners was available.
- b In the original UNODC database, for Slovakia the variable “family member—female” was zero, the variable “family member—male” one, and the total count 13. As the metadata did not explain this, it seems likely that it is an oversight and that the variable “family member—female” equals 12 counts (or 0.44/100,000).



## Incidence of physical firearm violence in the EU

Several studies note that the majority of incidents where women are the victim of firearm-related violence take place in the domestic sphere.<sup>28</sup>

Figure 3 depicts the estimated incidence rate of physical firearm violence in the EU in 2019. The data, sourced from the GBD study, includes injuries as well as deaths following these incidents, but excludes suicides.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 3 shows that Belgium—with a rate of 5.23—has the highest female victimization incidence rate per 100,000 female inhabitants for cases of physical violence by firearm, closely followed by Austria (4.99), Portugal (4.97), and France (4.95).<sup>a</sup> This data could therefore indicate that these countries have higher levels of firearm-related IPV compared to other EU countries.

A comparison of UNODC data on family violence with GBD data on general firearm violence incidence shows that Latvia and Lithuania have high levels of domestic violence, but low levels of physical violence by firearm. This suggests that firearms are less commonly used in the domestic context in these countries.

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disputes.<sup>31</sup> Firearms have certain specific characteristics<sup>32</sup> that may make them a convenient modus operandi in certain homicide constellations, such as by:

- allowing perpetrators to overcome resistance from the victim;
- making it easy for perpetrators to kill several people simultaneously;
- allowing perpetrators to kill swiftly, without any blatant brutality and without giving the victim a chance to scream or call for pity;
- making it easy to kill for people without a history of violence or a personality disorder; and
- offering the possibility of death by suicide immediately following the homicide.<sup>33</sup>

The first and last arguments are particularly relevant in the context of family gun violence. The second part of this paper uses media articles identified by the Incident Monitor, in addition to a literature review, to provide an overview of how these characteristics of family gun violence could relate to the EU context.

## Firearm use in family violence

Incidents involving a firearm result in a deadly outcome more often than with any other modus operandi. Previous research shows a strong association between family ownership of firearms and an increased risk of homicide or suicide,<sup>30</sup> as well as an increased risk of multiple victims in domestic

The following sections address the use of firearms by physically weaker perpetrators to overpower physically stronger victims, how the availability of firearms in the home influences the outcome of domestic disputes, and the use of firearms in homicide–suicide cases.

<sup>a</sup> Malta, Cyprus, and Luxembourg were excluded, since even one incident can result in a high incidence rate given their small size.



## Firearms to overcome physical superiority of the victim

In 1958, Wolfgang coined the “physical strength hypothesis” to explain the use of firearms. He posits that offenders with less physical strength than their victims turn to firearms or other superior weaponry to distance themselves from their victim and as such offset the physical power differential.<sup>34</sup> Familial relationships often involve differences in power, and the mechanism of a firearm can be easily operated by women and even (very young) children.<sup>35</sup> This subsection discusses the use of firearms by adolescents, women, and elderly family members.

### Use of firearms by adolescents

Following the physical strength hypothesis, adolescents are generally more likely to resort to using a firearm than adult offenders. Juvenile offenders often lack the physical strength necessary to overcome their adult victim. The use of a firearm therefore serves to inverse the power balance between victim and offender, enabling the adolescent to easily harm or kill its target. This is especially the case in incidents of parricide where the adolescent often lacks the physical strength necessary to subdue an older, stronger, or larger parent.<sup>36</sup> A recent but rare example of this type of parricide took place in December 2022 in Jambes, Belgium: an adolescent boy (aged between 14 and 15), whose youth was marked by parental absence, entered the home of his grandmother after the recent death of his grandfather, and shot his 37-year-old father—

who had previously left him to start a new life abroad—in the leg.<sup>37</sup>

### Use of firearms by women

In the rare cases where women are perpetrators of IPH, there is often a history of domestic abuse by their partner. In the majority of these cases,

the woman tries to defend herself against the ongoing abuse or because of the fear of abuse.<sup>38</sup> Following Johnson’s typology (see above), these incidents can be qualified as cases of “violent resistance”, where the victim of intimate

terrorism fights back and tries to resist control. This counter-reaction can be an instinctive reaction to being attacked, but may also be due to a fear that the assault will continue if she does nothing to stop him. The physical difference between the perpetrator and victim does not guarantee that the perpetrator will succeed and may lead the woman to see no other way out than to kill her partner.<sup>39</sup> To overcome these physical differences and ensure a lethal outcome, the

woman may resort to using a firearm. In November 2019, a 43-year-old Portuguese woman stood trial for the attempted murder of her partner. She went out to the backyard, gun in hand, and shot her partner three times. After pursuing her into the house, her partner took the pistol and

pointed it back at her. Following the dispute, the woman fled to a friend in Lisbon. At the trial she testified that she was a victim of domestic violence, stating that her partner had threatened to take away her son, whose biological father was her partner, to prevent her from leaving the relationship.<sup>40</sup>

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In cases of filicide, female perpetrators generally use methods such as asphyxiation rather than firearms to kill their children. The occasional case is reported in the media, however. In Austria, for example, a 29-year-old is believed to have stolen a gun from her ex-partner and used it to kill her daughter and then herself. Her ex-partner had a gun ownership permit and legally owned several weapons. The exact circumstances that led to this act of despair are still unclear.<sup>41</sup>

## Use of firearms by elderly perpetrators

While not really touched upon in the international literature, the physical strength hypothesis can also be applied to incidents where elderly family members turn violent towards their younger, and therefore often healthier and stronger, victims. In Formentera, Spain, for example, an 83-year-old man threatened his 49-year-old daughter-in-law with a gun following an earlier incident in which the octogenarian had wielded an axe to his daughter-in-law's car, which she had later reported to the police. When the woman left the house to take her son to school, the man appeared, brandishing a gun and threatening to kill her through the window of the car. Following the commotion, the woman's 22-year-old son came out of the house to defend his mother and, after a struggle, ended up being shot in his right leg and arm. The man then walked away from the house and shot himself in the head.<sup>42</sup>

## Firearms in the home

Several studies on domestic homicides report on the increased risk of lethal domestic violence when a firearm is readily available at the family home.<sup>43</sup> Previous studies have found that legal firearm ownership enables firearms to be accessible at home. For example, Sweden noticed a drastic decline in the rates of domestic homicide cases or male-perpetrated lethal firearm violence

against former and current intimate partners, noting that between 2014 and 2017 approximately 5 per cent of all firearm homicides were related to the domestic sphere. Some have argued that this is partly driven by the decrease in legal firearm ownership.<sup>44</sup>

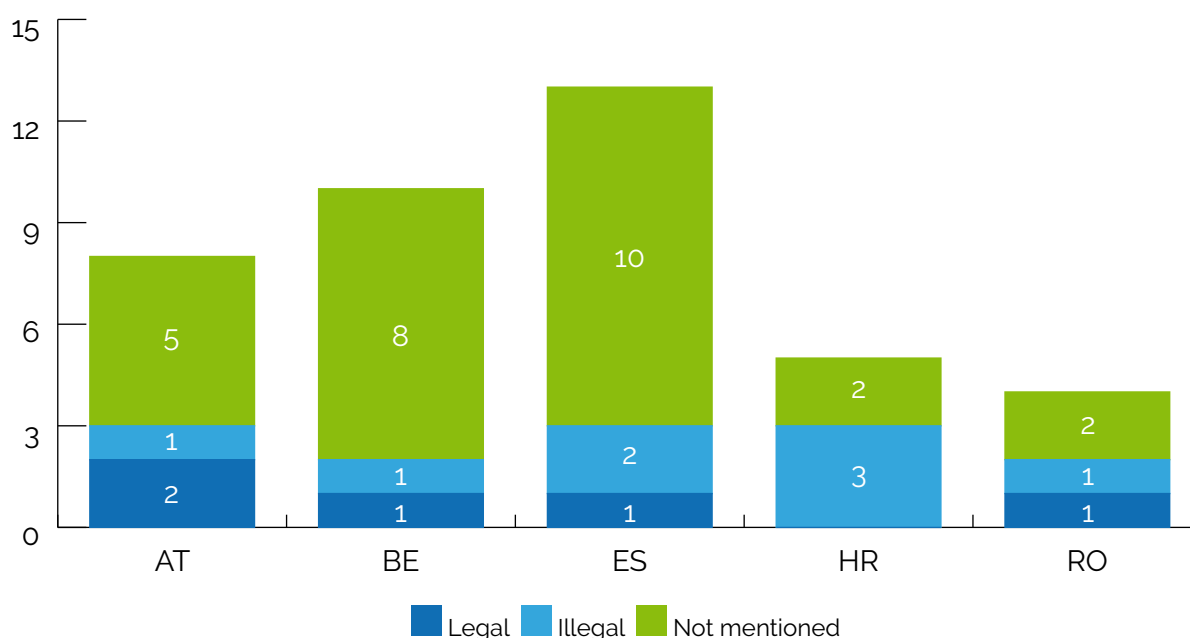
A recent study on firearm homicides in Europe, which presents the prevalence of firearm homicides in five European countries, identified two distinct country profiles.<sup>45</sup> The first one of the profiles depicts firearms as a common *modus operandi* in domestic homicides and an over-representation of female victims in firearm homicides in these countries. The study further suggests that “the degree to which firearms are legally available may determine characteristics of firearm homicides within a country”, reporting that the legal availability of firearms in the countries represented in this country profile have a relatively high legal availability of firearms.<sup>46</sup> A European study that analysed the correlations between gun ownership and homicide rates found a significant correlation between the levels of female gunshot homicides and gun possession rates, however this correlation was weaker than for male gun deaths. As female homicide victims are generally the result of fatal domestic disputes, the study notes that the impact of gun ownership on gun homicides is greatest in cases connected to domestic disputes.<sup>47</sup> The study on firearm homicides in Europe observed a similar dynamic, noting, however, that gun availability is not directly correlated to gun homicide rates, since these rates are mostly influenced by the amount of homicides in the criminal milieu.<sup>48</sup>

According to previous research, criminal and terrorist firearm violence often involves illegal firearms and is strongly linked to illicit firearms trafficking. Firearms used in domestic disputes are often locally available—whether legally or illegally—and, contrary to the criminal context, the role of international firearms trafficking appears to be minimal.<sup>49</sup>

Due to limited time and resources, out of the 243 cases identified in the seven EU countries (see above), 40 incidents were selected—using a randomizer tool (randomizer.org)—for further analysis to determine the legal status of the firearm used in these cases. Figure 4 shows that the legal status of the weapon is often not mentioned (n=26 of 40) in the media reports. Given that only 13 out of 40 media reports referred to the legal status of the firearm, it is difficult to provide conclusive evidence on the use of legal versus illegal firearms

in family gun violence incidents; however, contrary to the criminal milieu where firearms are mainly sourced from the illegal market, the use of legal versus illegal firearms appears to be more evenly distributed (n=5 and 8, respectively) in family gun violence incidents. Without further information to the contrary, policymakers should not assume that efforts to address the illicit trafficking of firearms will necessarily impact family gun violence; rather the risk of legal firearms should also be taken into account.

**Figure 4** Legal status of the weapons used in a selection of firearm-related incidents, per country



In Austria, for example, on 8 January 2022, a 46-year-old man shot his 42-year-old wife in the head with a pistol. As he was a former hunter, the man legally owned the murder weapon and three other guns. While he could not remember exactly what had triggered the incident, the marriage had broken down and the couple had discussed divorce. After an argument, the man went down to the cellar, drank beer and schnapps, and later re-emerged with the gun and shot his wife. According to his statements, he had long contemplated murder and suicide.<sup>50</sup> In October 2018, a Spanish woman shot her husband twice in the head and killed him. The 41-year-old woman had a brief argument with her husband after he became

angry with her for waking him up when she went out to smoke. When he returned to sleep, the perpetrator took her gun and fired two shots in the victim's head. The woman was a gun enthusiast and a member of a shooting club. She held several firearms licences and a 9 mm pistol with which she had committed the crime.<sup>51</sup>

In the case of parricide, research indicates that the availability of firearms in homes could play an important role, especially when the perpetrator is a minor. One study found that almost half of the parricides in their study sample were committed with a firearm. They also noted that firearms are more commonly used by minors than adult pepe-

trators. As well as aligning with the physical strength hypothesis, the results also indicated that adolescent parricide offenders are more impulsive and inclined to kill without premeditation compared to adults.<sup>52</sup> According to another study, adolescent perpetrators of parricide are often first offenders who mainly react in anger following a dispute with a parent(s).<sup>53</sup> A sudden impulsive outburst of rage and access to a firearm can then lead from normal family discord to homicide in the home. An incident illustrating this dynamic took place in Elche, Spain, in February 2022. Following an argument about his school grades, a 15-year-old boy killed his parents and his 10-year-old brother using his father's hunting rifle. He was found three days later by the police with the victims' bodies in the house.<sup>54</sup> The common factor in these types of incidents—referred to as diffuse conflict familicides by Liem and Reichelmann<sup>55</sup>—is the presence of a conflict that spontaneously erupts into lethal violence. The fact that these incidents are very difficult to predict,<sup>56</sup> and therefore difficult to take preventative measures against, is concerning. The presence of a firearm in the house does, however, increase the risk of an adolescent gaining access to a deadly weapon, as well as the likelihood of the conflict resulting in a lethal outcome. Restrictive laws on keeping firearms at home may therefore be considered an important part of strategies to prevent serious injuries or lethal outcomes in such conflicts.

## Firearms and homicide-suicides

One specific form of family violence is homicide-suicide. Previous research has found that firearms are the main modus operandi in homicide-suicide incidents.<sup>57</sup> This may be because a firearm can also quickly be turned around to take one's own

life.<sup>58</sup> Several studies noted the high proportion of homicide-suicide incidents, among those analysed, that took place in the family context. A Croatian study exploring 17 homicide-suicide cases between 1986 and 2009 found that 76 per cent occurred in the domestic sphere, half of which involved a firearm.<sup>59</sup> A study of 58 cases of homicide-suicide in Germany between 1994 and 2014 noted that 66 per cent were domestic cases and over half of these cases involved a firearm for both the homicide and the suicide.<sup>60</sup> A homicide-suicide study in Sweden reported that 54 per cent of the cases identified were domestic related. The study further noted that the majority of the homicide-suicides were perpetrated using a firearm.<sup>61</sup>

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The common factor in these types of incidents is the presence of a conflict that spontaneously erupts into lethal violence.

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Nevertheless, the prevalence rates of familicide-suicides are low. Generally, the perpetrators are men in their 30s and 40s.

Female-perpetrated familicide-suicides are even rarer. Firearms are the main modus operandi—seven out of ten familicide cases in the United States are perpetrated with a firearm. While the rates of firearm use in familicides in Europe are much lower, a large number of cases still involve the use of a gun—five out of ten in Belgium, and one in four in the Netherlands. Furthermore, about half of all familicides were followed by suicide, indicating a higher prevalence of suicide in cases of IPH or filicide.<sup>62</sup>

These rare cases of familicide-suicides can be further divided into two subtypes according to the motives of the perpetrator. The first type entails an element of “altruism”, where the spouse (most often the man) kills his family believing that they cannot go on living without his support. In paradigmatic cases of this kind of IPH, the male caregiver kills his ailing wife before taking his own life.<sup>63</sup> The perpetrator wishes to end the suffering of his spouse or can no longer carry the burden of taking care of her.<sup>64</sup> In March 2019, in Belgium, for example, an 85-year-old man took

his revolver and killed his wife and then himself. The perpetrator's wife was seriously ill and, according to his neighbours, clearly struggling to take care of her. Neighbours report that his greatest fear was to die before his wife and for there to be nobody left to take care of her.<sup>65</sup> In the context of familicide-suicide, the familicidal man can be defined as a despondent husband who seems to act out of altruistic motives. A drastic change in economic circumstances often leads to a sense of desperation that lies at the root of these incidents. In most of these cases, the male perpetrator has faced employment and/or financial problems, leading him to believe that killing his family is the only way he can protect them from the fate that would befall them without his support.<sup>66</sup>

The second subtype is based on the spouse's feelings of anger, jealousy or lack of control, and revenge towards the other spouse. In cases of IPH, this often manifests in a husband killing his (ex) partner and then himself out of anger or jealousy, sometimes due to suspicions about the female partner's fidelity. This type of IPHS is punitive in nature and often preceded by a history of domestic violence. It is often (the threat of) separation that triggers the event.<sup>67</sup> Following Johnson's typology, this type of violence can also be defined as intimate terrorism.<sup>68</sup> In December 2021, for example, a 73-year-old man fatally shot his 43-year-old ex-wife. The couple married in Italy, but later separated. After the divorce, the woman returned to her Romanian roots and started a successful business with her new boyfriend. Her ex-husband later followed her to Romania, killed her and then turned the gun on himself. In Belgium, in December 2022, a man shot his wife, aimed the gun, which became jammed, at her suspected lover, before trying to kill himself with his rifle. The wife was not lethally wounded, but the perpetrator's condition was life threatening.<sup>69</sup> "Spousal revenge familicide" is often instigated by feelings of jealousy or revenge, especially when the spouse (threatens) to leave and take the children with her. The threat of withdrawal or estrangement

from the female partner threatens the male perpetrator's sense of control over their spouse's reproductive capacity. These incidents, particularly in the case of the despondent husband, show a history of domestic violence. The female partner is the primary target in spousal revenge familicide, while the children are perceived as an extension of the intimate partner.<sup>70</sup> In Belgium, for example, in February 2021, a 49-year-old police officer used his service weapon to shoot his 41-year-old wife and 13-year-old stepdaughter before taking his own life.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusions and implications

Since most literature on family gun violence is US-based, this paper sought to provide an overview of family gun violence in the EU. It notes that family violence in the EU is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, marked by the disproportionate victimization of women. This disproportionality is most obvious in cases of IPV.

Nevertheless, this paper further illustrates that the dynamics of family violence are not as dichotomous as the general literature on domestic and family violence suggests. Women can also be perpetrators, but most often use violence as a defence mechanism against constant abuse by their partner.

Firearms have certain specific characteristics that make them especially lethal in some cases of family violence. A firearm allows a physically weaker perpetrator to overpower its victim. According to the physical strength hypothesis, the use of firearms in cases of family violence could appeal to adolescents, women, and elderly family members. A firearm also makes it possible to kill several people at once and commit suicide afterwards. In cases of IPHS, a jealous husband can act out of revenge, killing his current or former partner and then turning the gun on himself. On

the other hand, elderly husbands use a firearm to kill their ailing wife and then themselves when they can no longer manage the burden of taking care of their wife. Adequate gun control regulations are therefore a necessity given that the presence of a firearm in a dispute increases the risk of a lethal outcome.

As studies suggest that these characteristics leave little room for a displacement effect— meaning that in absence of a firearm the perpetrator would use another, equally deadly, weapon—it may imply that ensuring that firearms control policies specifically address family violence can result in lower incidences and less lethal and/or injurious outcomes.

Findings from the literature review suggest that the guns used in incidents of family violence are more frequently legally held compared to gun violence incidents in the criminal milieu. Although needing to be interpreted with caution, media reporting on the legal status of the firearm in the seven EU countries seems to back up this finding. The analysis of a limited number of media reports in seven EU member states suggests that, unlike for other criminal violence incidents, there is little evidence that the guns used in family violence incidents tend to be illegally held. These findings are also in line with previous European research on firearm violence and firearms trafficking that indicates that firearms used in domestic disputes are often locally available, whether legally or illegally.<sup>72</sup> This further implies that legal firearms ownership enables the accessibility of firearms in the home, which has been identified as a risk factor for more severe injuries and lethal outcomes of family violence, especially in IPV incidents.<sup>73</sup> Access to a firearm can also enable the perpetrator to act on impulse,<sup>74</sup> which could, for example, make it more likely for a heated discussion between parent and offspring to result in a lethal outcome. Consequently, strict regulations on firearms licences and keeping firearms at home could play a significant role in reducing (lethal) domestic gun violence.

Finally, it should be noted that much remains unknown about family gun violence in the EU. The data set generated for this paper by the Incident Monitor could help to provide a clearer picture of victim and perpetrator characteristics—a topic that was outside of the scope of this paper. Given that only a limited subset of the database was analysed to identify the legal status of the firearms involved, and the findings thus have to be interpreted very carefully, a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the data set could generate more conclusive results. As such, the limitations of this paper encourage further research into the characteristics of family gun violence in the EU.



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## Project INSIGHT

Project INSIGHT is an initiative that aims to prevent violence by enhancing the visibility of firearm violence in the European Union. With an online knowledge platform ([www.gunviolence.eu](http://www.gunviolence.eu)) as its primary tool, the project also entails the creation of eight research reports on various themes of firearms violence. Project INSIGHT is funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund - Police.

Project INSIGHT is coordinated by the Flemish Peace Institute. The Flemish Peace Institute was established in 2004 as a para-parliamentary institution within the Flemish Parliament. It provides thorough analyses, informs and organizes the debate and promotes peace and the prevention of violence. In the past the institute has coordinated other EU-funded projects on firearms such as SAFTE, DIVERT and TARGET.

The publication process of the Project INSIGHT research reports was supervised by the Small Arms Survey. The Small Arms Survey strengthens the capacity of governments and practitioners to reduce illicit arms flows and armed violence through three mutually reinforcing activities: the generation of policy relevant knowledge, the development of authoritative resources and tools, and the provision of training and other services.

Other partners in the Project INSIGHT-network include Textgain, SIPRI, and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University. The project also receives support from the Belgian Federal Police, Europol, European Firearms Experts, Dutch National Police and SEESAC.

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