

PROJECT INSIGHT

Criminal Gun Violence in the European Union

Astrid De Schutter (Flemish Peace Institute)

KEY FINDINGS

- Using health data on male victimisation following physical violence involving a firearm as a proxy, we have found that Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and Austria show the highest estimated rates of criminal gun violence in the European Union.
- Armed robberies committed by amateur criminals are often carried out with replica firearms whereas organised professional robbers are more often equipped with live-firing weapons and sometimes even military-grade firearms.
- Italy, the Netherlands, France and Belgium are confronted with substantial drug-related gun violence, which can partially be explained by violence associated with illicit drug-trafficking linked to imports at the shipping ports in these countries.
- Sweden and Denmark are marked by the presence of gangs which facilitate their members' access to firearms.
- The overlap between drugs, gang violence and armed robberies adds to the complexity of criminal violence; a strict division between these criminal contexts is therefore often not possible. This also illustrates the phenomenon that gun violence facilitates several different types of crime.

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Introduction

One of the key findings of the European Union (EU) Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) of 2021 is that “the use of violence by criminals involved in serious and organised crime in the EU appears to have been increasing in terms of the frequency of use and its severity”. In addition to their indiscriminate use of violence, including not shying away from harming innocent bystanders, “the threat from violent incidents has been augmented by the frequent use of firearms or explosives in public.”¹ Firearms are of particular interest to criminals as they are important enablers of various types of criminal activity. Firearms can be used as tools to perpetuate power and increase territorial reach, but they also enable criminals to self-protect and control already established territory, defending it against both competitors and public forces.² Since the use of firearms increases the risk of a lethal outcome and their use is widespread globally, it is important to prevent and reduce gun violence as much as possible.

In order to combat gun-related crime, it is essential to construct a comprehensive intelligence picture of the phenomenon of criminal gun violence. In order to do so it is crucial to have a clear definition of the phenomenon.

For the purposes of this research paper, *criminal*

gun violence is defined as “the use of firearms to threaten, injure or kill another person” or persons while committing criminal activities, such as – but not limited to – “armed robberies, drug trade, violent crime, criminal extortion, and human trafficking”.³

Gaining access to the necessary data is also essential to assessing the phenomenon. However, comprehensive and comparable official data on firearm violence are almost non-existent, and this is hampered further by the lack of an unequivocal definition of “firearm violence”. This lack of a generally accepted definition results in countries defining firearm violence in a variety of ways, which makes it difficult to gather comparable data on the phenomenon in order to construct a comprehensive intelligence picture. In addition to this lack of uniform registration throughout the EU, the phenomenon of firearm violence also suffers from significant under-reporting.⁴ Comparing contextual data on gun violence between EU countries systematically is therefore, at present, difficult and such data are consequently to be interpreted with caution. Firearm trafficking in the EU is driven by criminal demand and these firearms are often used as instruments to facilitate the commission of criminal activities. This instrumental use of firearms (e.g., to threaten, injure or kill) often differs depending on the context in which they are being used.⁵

In this paper we aim to provide a condensed overview of several aspects of criminal firearm violence in those EU countries that experience high incidence rates by applying a mixed-methods approach which combines a literature review, open-source data and analyses, media articles and case studies.

To identify firearm violence in the criminal context, we used male victimisation by physical violence involving a firearm as a proxy variable to identify those EU countries experiencing a high rate of criminal firearm violence. Building on the findings of previous European research

and noting that both the perpetrators and the victims of gun violence in countries with high levels of criminal gun violence are overwhelmingly young males (under the age of 35),⁶ we argue that countries experiencing high levels of male victimisation by means of physical firearm violence are possibly countries with high levels of criminal gun violence too. We have purposely excluded female victimisation because gun violence against women most often takes place in the domestic sphere.⁷

In this paper we use data from the 2019 Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD), which was published in *The Lancet* in 2020 by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME).⁸ The study uses data 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)”.⁹ Given the problems inherent to the comparative data on firearm incidents in the EU, or the lack of data, the estimations of incidences of physical firearm violence in the GBD could be a valuable source with which to identify EU countries with high rates of gun violence. However, it is imperative to interpret these data with caution, noting that the exact context of these incidents is not reported and not every injury related to gun violence leads to the victim’s seeking medical help (and therefore registration in health records). It is also to be expected that these data seriously under-report threats being made with the use of a firearm as these types of conflict generally occur between criminals: victimised criminals are not inclined to disclose these types of incident to the police as doing so would also implicate them in criminal activities.¹⁰ In addition, experts consulted throughout the

reviewing process of this paper noted that the way in which the rates between the countries relate to each other are debatable. In this study we therefore refrain from formulating definitive conclusions on the exact numbers reported by the GBD and their relation to those of other EU countries; instead, we use the data to identify those countries that are likely to have high rates of criminal gun violence.

The paper then takes a closer look at the context of the criminal gun violence in these countries, focusing on three segments of such violence: armed robberies, drugs and gangs. According to a previous EU study, firearm violence in the criminal context in the EU is particularly widespread in robberies and the drug milieu.¹¹ In addition, gangs are important organisational structures that enables their members' access to firearms.¹²

The literature review consisted largely of research reports and journal articles that provide an overview of the general dynamics of the topic with a geographical focus on the EU. All 27 EU Member States were requested to provide official (law-enforcement) data on gun violence pertaining to armed robberies, drugs and gangs. As expected, though, the majority of the EU countries were not able to provide the data we asked for because they were either not readily available or they do not gather those particular types of data. The Gunviolence.eu – Incident Monitor^a was used to gather data from EU media reporting on the three contexts of criminal violence covered in this paper. These media cases are used throughout this paper as illustrations of the dynamics identified by the literature review.

a The Incident Monitor (www.gunviolence.eu/incident-monitor) aims to collect media articles on firearms violence incidents 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>

Criminal gun violence in the European Union

Figure 1 depicts the estimated rate of incidents of physical firearm violence in the EU in 2019; the rate includes both injuries and deaths following these incidents. Suicides are not included in the data.

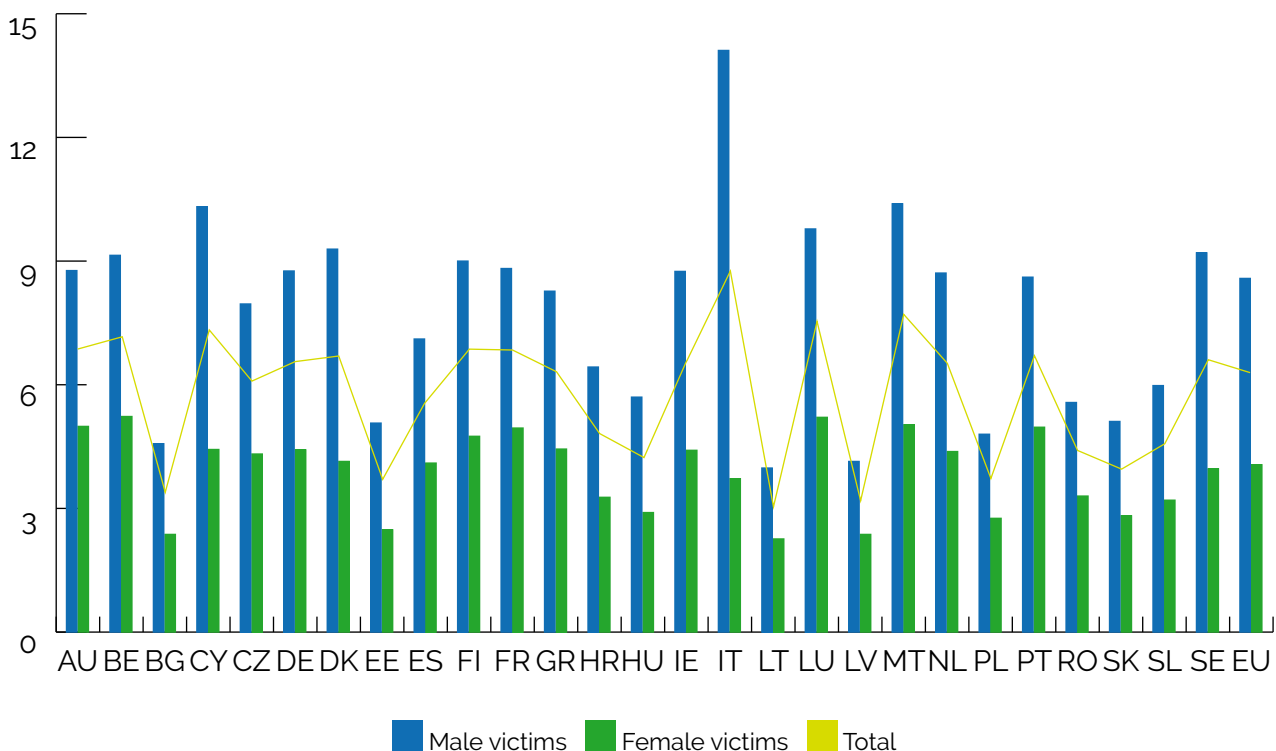
Based on these figures, Italy (14.11) shows the highest incidence rate per 100,000 male inhabitants for cases of physical violence by firearm. Denmark (9.29), Sweden (9.20), Belgium (9.14) and Austria (8.77) close the ranks of EU countries with the highest incidence rates of physical firearm violence against men.^a As we use male victimisation by physical violence using a firearm as a proxy variable for criminal violence, these rates might suggest high levels of crim

inal gun violence in these countries. Below we explore those criminal phenomena that might (even partially) account for the high incidence rates of firearm violence in these countries, focusing more specifically on armed robberies, drug-related violence and gang violence.

Armed robberies in the European Union

According to Europol, “a robbery is the felonious taking of property from another person or in his or her immediate presence, against his or her will, by violence or intimidation.”¹³ Violence is therefore an integral part of the modus operandi of robbery. Robberies can be carried out as part of the criminal activities of

Figure 1 Rates of physical firearm violence in the EU in 2019 (per 100,000 population)



Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation¹⁴

a We excluded Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta for the further analysis because of their small population size. In those countries, even one incident can result in a high incidence rate.

organised crime groups,^a but they can also be orchestrated by one or a few individual criminals seeking fast money.¹⁵ When weapons are used during a robbery, the crime “upgrades” to armed robbery.¹⁶ As stated in previous research, firearm violence in the criminal context is particularly present in robberies, with firearms being used mainly to threaten and not to harm or kill the victim.¹⁷

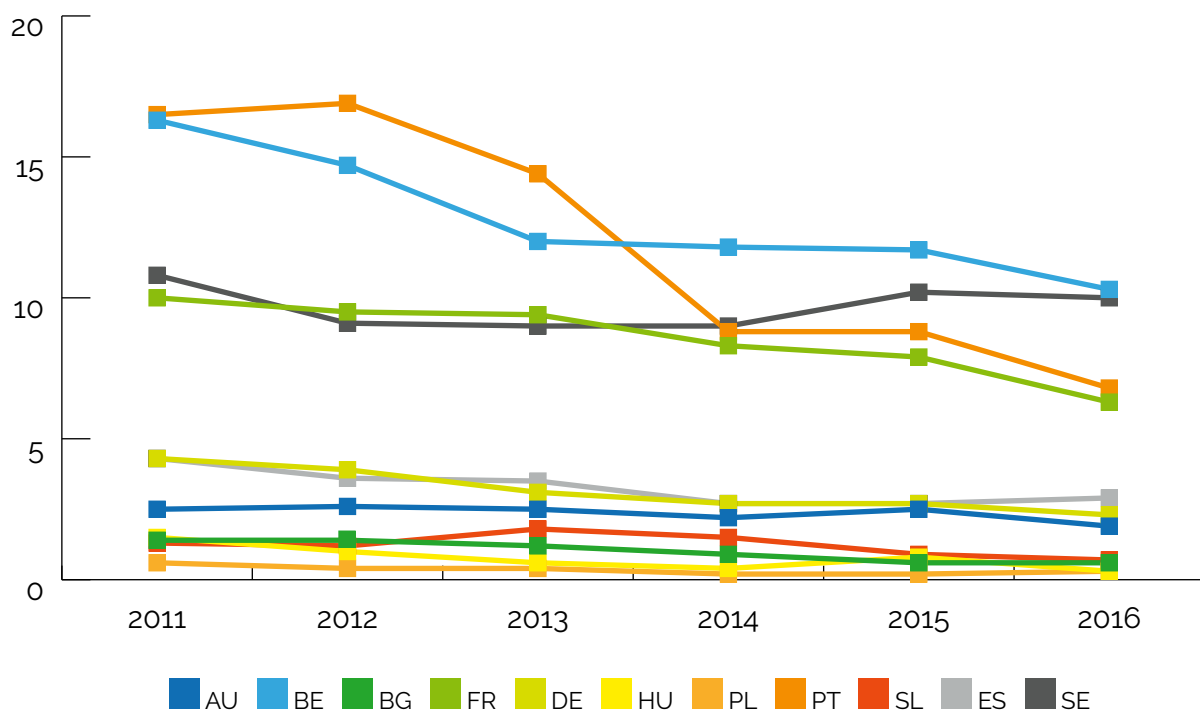
The findings on armed robberies based on the police statistics for 13 EU countries and published in the European Sourcebook suggest a steep decline in incidents between 2011 and 2016 (see Figure 2).

Excluding Lithuania and Romania,^b it has been found that almost all the EU countries included

have reported a more than 20% decrease (Austria: -24%; Hungary: -78%) in armed robberies per 100,000 population during these five years. The only exception is Sweden, which reports a decrease of only 8%. Belgium (10.3), Sweden (10.0), Portugal (6.8) and France (6.3) have reported the highest number of robberies with a firearm per 100,000 population in 2016.¹⁸

Based on the intended target, a distinction can be made between attacks directed against commercial targets (i.e., commercial robberies), against individuals in the public space (i.e., street robberies)¹⁹ and against private persons at home (i.e., home invasions). The victim pattern of armed robberies is therefore heterogeneous. In contrast to the domain of drugs and gangs, where the targets are mainly rival

Figure 2 Rate of armed robberies with a firearm in 11 EU countries (2011–2016, per 100,000 population)²⁰



Source: European Sourcebook

- a An organised crime group is defined in the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime as “a group of three or more persons that was not randomly formed; existing for a period of time; acting in concert with the aim of committing at least one crime punishable by at least four years’ incarceration; in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit” [Organized Crime \(unodc.org\)](https://www.unodc.org/).
- b The number of armed robberies in Lithuania and Romania is so low (between 0.0 and 0.1) that even one incident can make a great difference, which is why we have excluded these data.

criminals (cf. above), the victims of armed robberies are often non-criminals who have nothing to do with the activities of their attackers.²¹

According to a study of armed robberies, *commercial armed robbers* can be divided into three groups: amateurs, intermediates, and professional and persistent robbers. The largest group of known armed robbers are amateurs; they are generally characterised by their low level of organisation, their selection of more accessible targets and their lack of experience.²² A robbery is often committed in response to a particular personal crisis. It appears that drugs and alcohol are often an important factor and in such instances the firearms involved tend to be imitations.²³ Individuals and smaller businesses with less security are the main targets of smaller groups of criminals or criminals operating on their own.²⁴

According to previous research, petrol stations and local grocery stores are the popular targets of these amateur criminals.²⁵ In Austria, for example, during the period from the end of May to the beginning of June 2019, two venues in the Stockerau area were the targets of robberies. On 23 May 2019 one perpetrator successfully robbed a petrol station by threatening an employee with a pistol and then fled with a sum of cash. On 30 May 2019 a masked and armed perpetrator attempted to rob a gambling parlour but failed. Almost two weeks later, the same gambling parlour was successfully robbed when the perpetrator threatened an employee with a pistol and fled with the cash. On 22 August 2022, the police arrested two suspects. The 32-year-old confessed to the crime during interrogation, stating that he had acted only as the getaway driver whereas his 26-year-old accomplice was the main perpetrator. The stolen money was used to buy drugs and pay for the perpetrator's gambling addiction.²⁶ Another

example was a robbery in Romania, on 19 December 2021, when a 34-year-old man threatened a cashier with a toy gun. He also used physical violence, for which the victim needed medical care for his injuries. The robber was ultimately arrested by the police.²⁷

An exception to amateur robbers targeting places with low levels of security was a Romanian man who entered a bank and threatened the employees with a gun, demanding money. However, one bank employee quickly realised that the man was wielding a toy gun and refused to comply. Ultimately, the 32-year-old man left the premises without money or valuables and was later arrested by the police.²⁸

The firearms involved in amateur robberies tend to be imitations.

A study in which imprisoned armed robbers were questioned found that most of the time businesses that are more secure but where one hit renders a bigger profit (e.g., a bank) are more often targeted by organised crime groups.²⁹ Breaching the security measures of highly secured targets requires a great deal of intelligence, preparation, cooperation and logistical support to facilitate a robbery, which is often more feasible for members of organised crime groups. Intermediates display a higher level of experience and planning but (in contrast to professional and persistent robbers) they are not particularly dedicated to armed robbery as their criminal profession. **Professional and persistent robbers** often take weeks instead of days to plan their operations and they tend to select more high-profile targets. They often work in groups of three or four and reside in the same circles, which enables them to work with well-known associates.³⁰ Robberies with higher profile targets are also more likely to involve automatic firearms.³¹

A recent example of this modus operandi was the armed robbery at Schöne Edelmetaal, a company dealing in precious metals such as

gold and platinum. The robbery took place on 19 May 2021 and is one of the biggest heists in recent years in the Netherlands. Ten robbers aged between 23 and 45 years fled with gold and platinum bars valued at €15 million. The perpetrators were well prepared. They had scouted the site in advance: carrying grinders, walkie-talkies and special nails to puncture the tyres of any chasers, wearing bulletproof vests – and they had get-away cars waiting for them. They were also armed with automatic weapons. Nevertheless, after a hot pursuit and a shoot-out in the countryside, the Dutch police arrested the robbers. One of the thieves died after he was hit during the shooting.³²

Another example of such a high-profile target robbery took place on 5 April 2012, when two gang members entered a bank in Sofia, Bulgaria. One perpetrator aimed a gun at the bank employees while his accomplice knocked the security guard to the ground. They managed to escape with BGN215,000 (approx. €110,000). On 25 October 2022, the Sofia City Court convicted the gang for armed robbery.³³

Drugs and guns in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and France

A second context that accounts for high levels of firearm violence in the EU is the drug trade.³⁴ Drug-trafficking is a highly profitable criminal undertaking. Cannabis remains the biggest consumer market for illicit drugs in Europe and

was estimated to generate €11.6 billion in 2018. This number is followed closely by that of the cocaine market, which in 2018 had an estimated consumer market value of €9.1 billion.³⁵ These

high profits also attract numerous actors, all wanting their slice of the illicit drug market. With profits this high and coinciding with increasing competition, criminals want to protect their busi-

nesses and their share of the illicit market. In order to do so, firearms are of instrumental value.

The drug seizures of cocaine and cannabis are concentrated in a few EU countries. In 2021, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain accounted for almost 75% of the total quantity of cocaine seized in the EU.³⁶ According to UNODC data, Spain, Italy and France accounted for 82% of

herbal cannabis seizures and 95% of cannabis resin seizures in the EU in 2021.³⁷ This concentration can possibly be explained by the presence of (important) harbours in these countries. This creates

opportunities for criminals to claim their stake in the distribution and sale of the drugs to the local consumer markets all across Europe.³⁸

According to Europol, the competition between drug suppliers has intensified in recent years and has led to an increase in violence.³⁹ In the spring and summer of 2021, for example, Marseille had to deal with a period of extreme and particularly deadly (firearm) violence.⁴⁰ The victims and perpetrators are often (very) young low-level members from the poor areas of Marseille.⁴¹ Young people from over all over France descend on Marseille and its suburbs looking for a better future and hoping to make fast and easy money.⁴² Many of these shootings

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pertain to the settlement of territorial disputes: for example, on 25 June 2021, a 32-year-old man, known and convicted for drug offences in 2017, was shot dead during a football game. Police stated this killing was committed as settlement between drug-trafficking gangs.⁴³ The shootings can also be a form of retaliation for theft,⁴⁴ as was the case which resulted in the death of a Nigerian man who was suspected of stealing a bag with a few grams of cannabis resin and a handful of euros. The gang boss wanted to set an example.⁴⁵

Law-enforcement interventions can also destabilise the existing drug market by disrupting the capacity of certain criminal groups to defend themselves and their territories (or by eliminating them entirely). By disrupting the military balance between rival drug-trafficking organisations, law-enforcement indirectly improve the position of a rival organisation. This causes an imbalance in territorial stability and could attract rival groups, who then try to claim dominance.⁴⁶ Since the summer of 2022, the city of Antwerp (and its surrounding neighbourhoods) has been plagued by shootings and explosions connected to the drug market. The main source of this outbreak of violence can be traced back to the hacking of the encrypted app, Sky ECC, which was used by drug criminals all over Europe and contained a large amount of information on the persons involved and their criminal dealings. This consequently led to the arrest of a large number of prominent and less prominent drug criminals. In the result, this law-enforcement intervention destabilised the existing drug market and provided an opportunity for rival drug criminals to try to claim their own or a bigger segment of the illicit drug market. And even though many high-level drug actors were

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arrested and detained, they continued to conduct their businesses from inside prison, giving orders to their accomplices to keep defending their territory. This has led to an explosion of (gun) violence in Antwerp and its surrounding areas, which even spilled over into Brussels and Malins (among other cities).⁴⁷ In the first half of 2022, for example, Brussels recorded 22 shootings, the majority of which the police have linked to the drug trade.⁴⁸

When considering the age of the criminals, it is perceived that younger criminals resort to violence more easily than older criminals. In responding to the situation of drug violence in the Netherlands and Belgium, which have closely intertwined drug markets, law-enforcement experts report that the persons involved in the current territorial disputes in these countries are often very young low-level criminals with limited experience who can be persuaded to carry out the attacks for little money.⁴⁹ A recent report is of a 15-year-old Dutch boy who is being investigated for his involvement in multiple explosions related to the drug war going on in Antwerp and its surrounding municipalities in the autumn of 2022.⁵⁰ It appears that these young criminals, following an increase in the availability of firearms on criminal markets in certain countries, even have access to weapons.⁵¹ Several studies of the UNODC and the Flemish Peace Institute have noted the increased availability of firearms on the criminal markets in several EU countries. In addition to the presence of conflict-legacy weapons (especially from the Western Balkans), criminals have also exploited legal loopholes which has led to an increased availability of reactivated firearms, converted blank-firing weapons or converted Flobert-calibre weapons. As a result, even low-level and (very)

young criminals have gained access to firearms.⁵²

Studies also show that gang membership influences gun-carrying patterns and increases access to guns. Criminals often turn to gangs to gain access to firearms as they often have a large stock of weapons to make available to their members.⁵³ On the weekend of 12 November 2022, for example, the Belgian police stopped two minors of 15 and 16 years of age who were riding on a motorcycle. The passenger (aged 15) was carrying 15 grams of cannabis, a precision scale, small empty bags and a substantial amount of cash with him. As these elements raised suspicions of drug dealing, the police carried out a search of the suspect's house and found several amphetamine pills, cannabis resin and a firearm.⁵⁴

According to a study on firearm violence in the EU, it appears that a significant number of drug criminals also have **access to military-grade weapons**.⁵⁵ Using their criminal connections with drug cartels in Latin America and corrupt port workers to facilitate the importation of cocaine, the mafia group 'Ndrangheta dominates the illegal drug trade in Italy.⁵⁶ In addition to its strong involvement in the drug milieu, the 'Ndrangheta also has access to a significant arsenal of firearms and is heavily involved in the trafficking of firearms with very well-established networks in the Balkans region.⁵⁷ An example of their access to high-end weapons was the seizure made by the Turin Flying Squad in October 2021: they found, among other things, two AK-47 semi-automatic rifles, two Beretta semi-automatic rifles, four guns with overlapping barrels and several other high-calibre firearms in the garage of a man linked to the 'Ndrangheta.⁵⁸ The southern part of Italy is particularly plagued by drug-related shootings that are often tied to the 'Ndrangheta and/or rival clans.⁵⁹

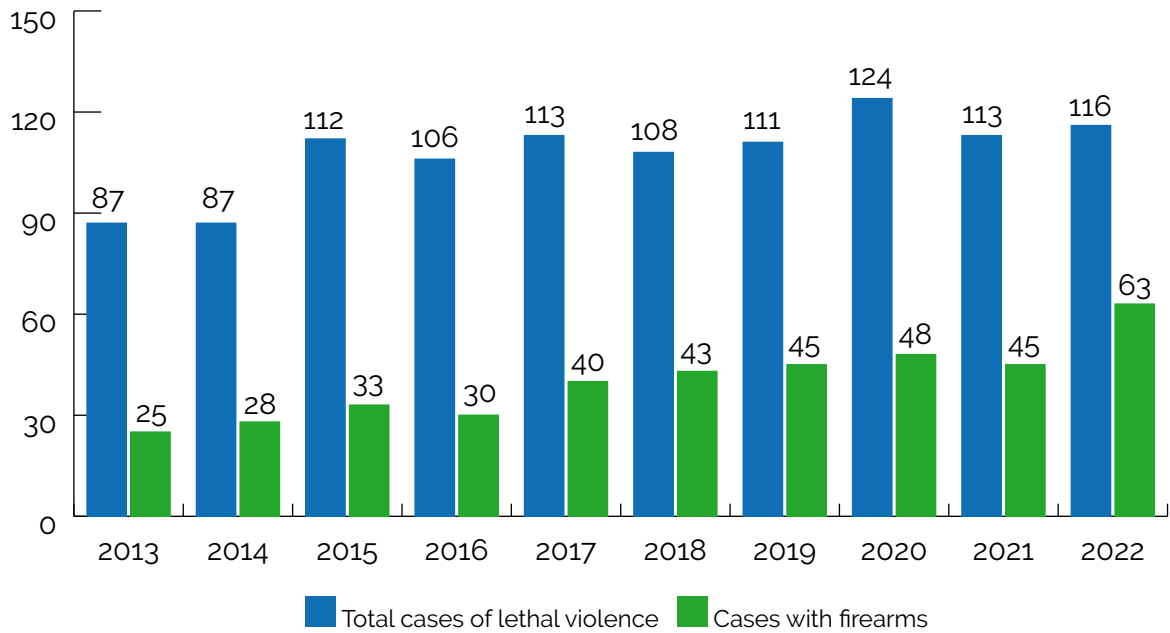
Gangs and guns in Sweden and Denmark

Because of their inherent violent nature and their relatively easy access to firearms, gangs are of particular interest when studying criminal gun violence in the EU.⁶⁰ When taking a closer look at the high levels of male victimisation by firearm violence in Sweden and Denmark, these might partially be explained by the presence of criminal gangs in these countries and their access to firearms. Often one incident of firearm violence incites a reaction, leading to more firearm violence.⁶¹ Based on the nature of these gangs, in this paper we distinguish between street gangs and Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMCGs).⁶²

Swedish street gangs

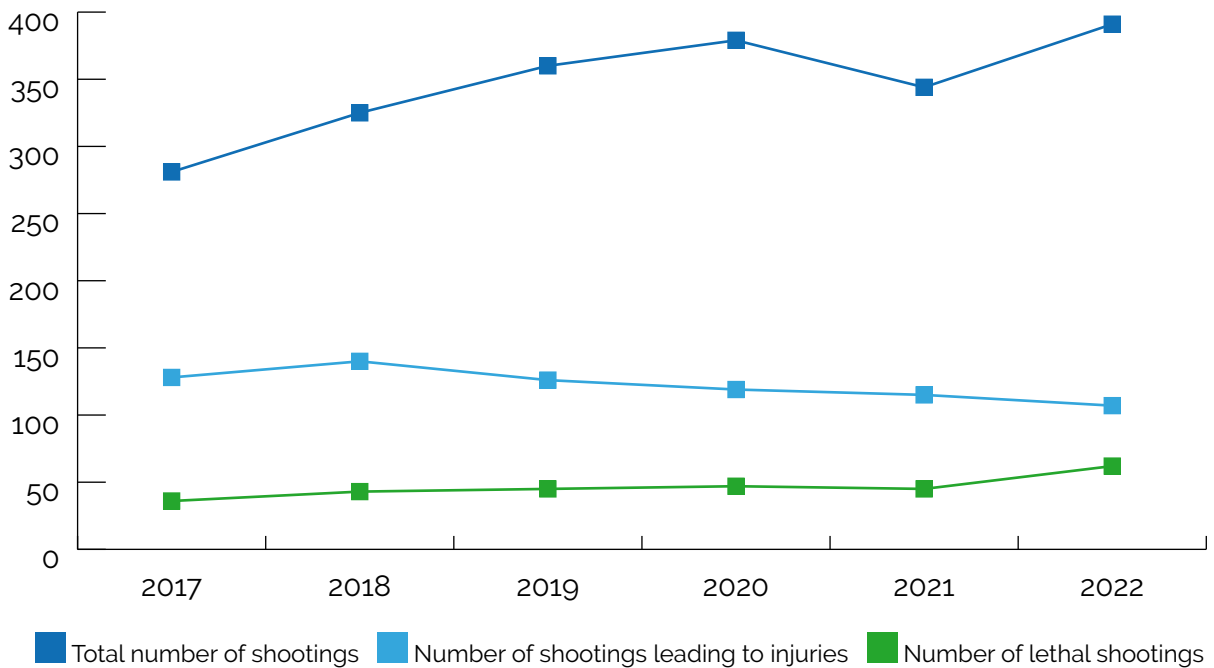
Based on homicide data from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), it was found that, contrary to developments in other European countries which showed a general decline in firearms homicide rates between 2000 and 2020, Sweden experienced an increase in both firearm-related homicides and firearm use in homicides,⁶³ in addition to an increase in the number of shootings in the country, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3 Total lethal violence versus lethal violence involving firearms in Sweden (2013-2022)⁶⁴



Source: Brå

Figure 4 Fatal and non-fatal shootings in Sweden (2017-2022)⁶⁵



Source: Swedish Police

The increased firearm violence and homicides in Sweden are often linked to disputes among rival street gangs.⁶⁶ Using the data from the Incident Monitor, we identified two particularly violent Swedish gangs whose rivalry resulted in a high frequency of violent incidents where the use of guns often led to injury or even a deadly outcome. These stories depict young people living in vulnerable areas transitioning into crime as a way of acquiring status, power and fast money.

The following case study is an illuminating example of how media sources can provide valuable information on the development and dynamics of a certain criminal phenomenon.

Between 2015 and 2019, the gang- and drug-related violence in the region of Stockholm was dominated by two gangs. These gangs started out in Rinkeby in 2014 as a group of friends, some of whom carried weapons and were known to the police for vandalising police cars. They quickly graduated from being petty criminals to committing more serious criminal offences. In 2015, following a robbery, conflict arose between the friends and one of them ended up being shot dead in a forested area. Only one day later, a 16-year-old well-known criminal was murdered at a petrol station in Bromma. Following these events, the group split. The first group is called the “Gang of Fours”, nicknamed “Death Squad” by the media. The other group calls themselves “Shottaz”.⁶⁷ The years that followed were marked by several violent incidents between the rival gangs. Together, the 20 identified members of both gangs (all of them between 17 and 24 years of age in 2019) have been convicted of a total of 330 crimes, which include drug offences, robbery, assault and murder.⁶⁸ The gang war in Sweden is still ongoing, currently evidencing the conflicts between Husby’s Hyenas and the Shottaz Younger, a splinter group of the original Shottaz.⁶⁹ In 2020–2021, the Husby’s Hyenas (or HH) emerged in north-western Stock-

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holm and fought for power over the western part of the city. As younger criminals, they would act as the accomplices of leading criminals in all sorts of crime, including drug-trafficking, aggravated shoplifting, dealing in weapons and theft. Several years later, the HH had assumed a prominent and particularly violent role in the West End’s criminal milieu. They seemingly had ample access to weapons and did not hesitate to use them. The working theory of the police is that they are responsible for the murders of members of the

Shottaz gang. The HH was headed by two young men who already had an extensive criminal record encompassing several drug and weapon offences and it is reported that their main source of income has been drug sales.⁷⁰

The example of the Swedish street gangs also illustrates the reality that, especially in the context of drug- and gang-related violence, one incident of firearm violence often incites a reaction, leading to more firearm violence.⁷¹ Criminals often anticipate these events by arming themselves with (more) firearms. In an environment of constant threat and fear, these guns provide a sense of security.⁷² This in turn increases the lethality of the violence, which causes criminals to live in fear of being shot; this increases the demand for “guns for protection”, which in turn increases the demand for firearms, and so on. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle of guns and fear, fuelling violence and firearm trafficking.⁷³ Currently, the reign of the HH has ended and other gangs, such as the Foxtrot, who are heavily involved in the drug trade, dominate the gang violence in Sweden.⁷⁴

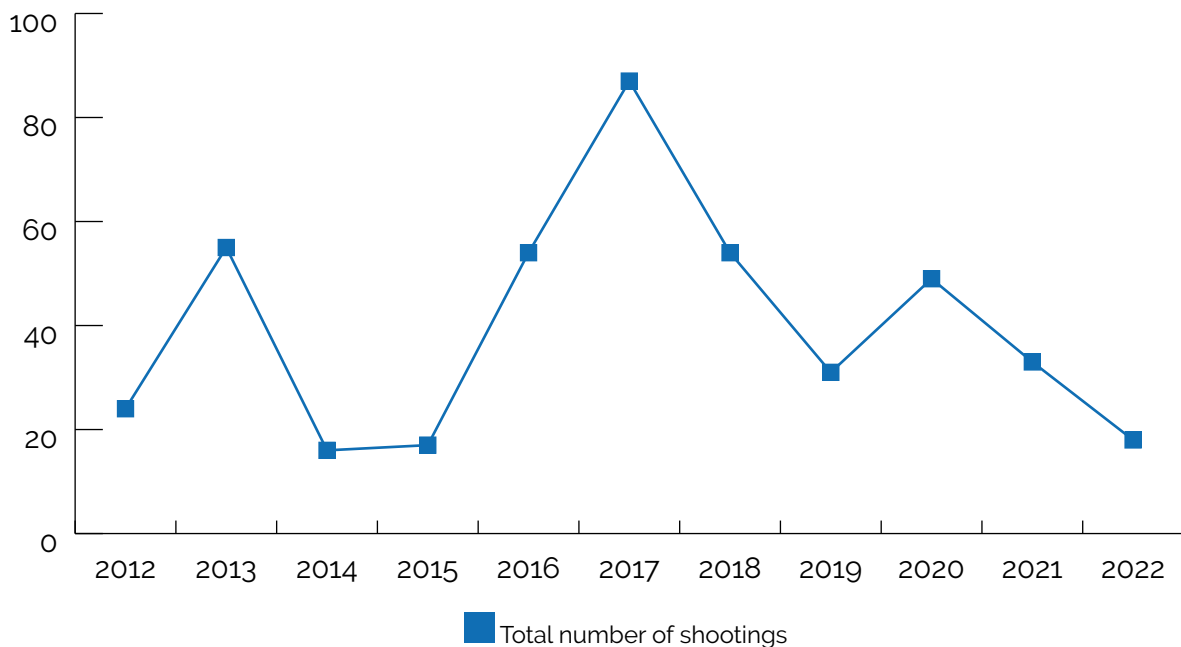
Danish Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

The high levels of male victimisation by gun violence in Denmark can (at least partially) be explained by the presence of Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMCGs) in the country. In 17 EU Member States OMCGs are considered a national threat and a national policing priority. Europol reports a steady increase in their membership since 2005, noting that the number of clubs in Europe has more than doubled. And whereas OMCGs are less common in Europe than street gangs, they are nevertheless prevalent. They are prone to extreme forms of violence, which is intrinsic to their subculture, and use it to exert control over group members, rival gangs and others. In order to ensure their controlling status, OMCGs rely on the use of firearms and explosive devices such as grenades.⁷⁵ These gangs are often involved in a multitude of crimes, such as drug-trafficking, extortion, illegal possession of firearms, assault and murder.⁷⁶

Owing to their violent nature and the risk of shootings, biker and gang groups are one of the focus areas of the Danish Police.⁷⁷ Data from the Danish Police indicate that these types of shooting have fluctuated dramatically during the past ten years, revealing steep increases in shootings of 218% in 2016 (compared to 2015) and of 61% in 2017 (compared to 2016), and a flare-up again in 2020 (see Figure 5).⁷⁸

The incidents related to biker and gang violence also generated many injuries and caused several deaths in the past decade. Figure 6 depicts the individual cases that led to injuries or death due to biker or gang violence as a result of the use of weapons of all types.^a It is important to note that one case can result in more than one injury and/or death.

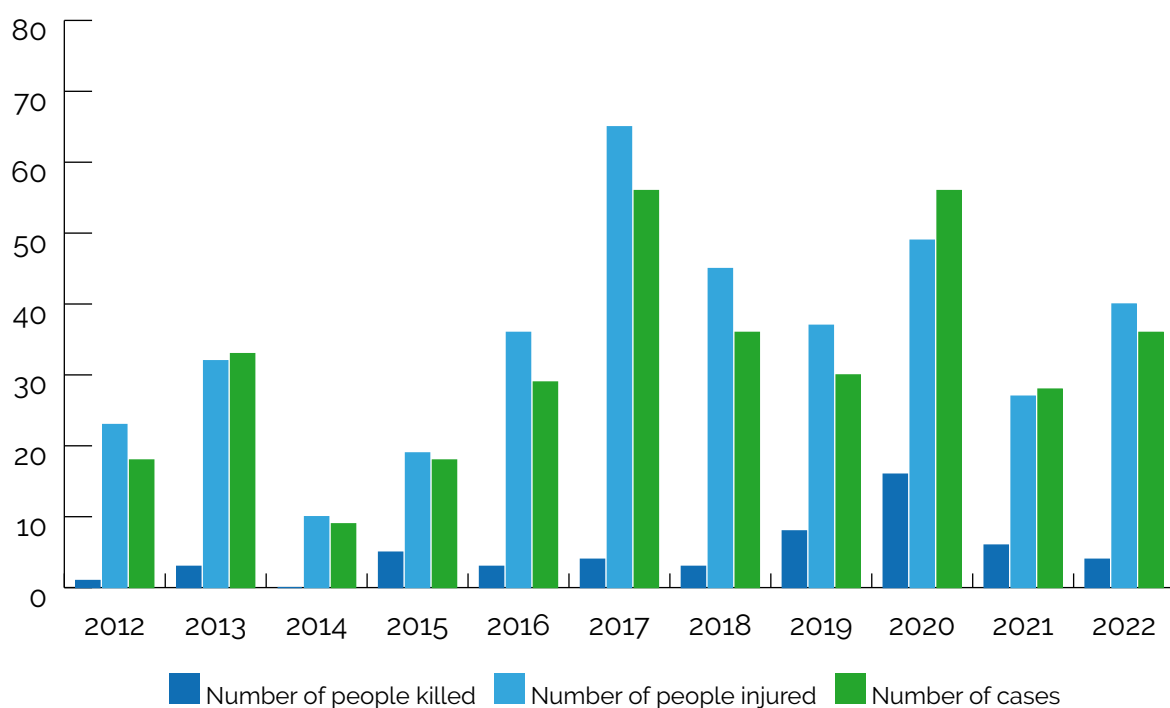
Figure 5 OMCG- and gang-related shootings in Denmark (2012-2022)⁷⁹



Source: Danish Police

a These are injuries or deaths linked to all types of biker or gang violence, such as shootings and stabbings. Note that one case can result in more than one injury and/or death.

Figure 6 OMCG- and gang-related injuries and deaths in Denmark, all weapon types (2012-2022)⁸⁰



Source: Danish Police

The police data show that the number of injuries and deaths follows the same pattern as that of the shootings (see Figure 5), indicating a steep increase in injuries in 2016 and 2017, and a flare-up in 2020. This suggests that an important portion of the casualties following biker and gang violence in Denmark is connected to the use of firearms. It appears that drugs also play a key role in their criminal activities, because the Danish Police also report that biker and gang groups are mainly charged with violations of the Danish Narcotics and Weapons Acts.⁸¹

A key player in several of these incidents is the notorious Copenhagen gang, NNV. The initialism was coined by the police to describe the loosely knit gang groupings in the outer Nørrebro neighbourhood and in Copenhagen's North-West district. The gang does not have its own official labels, clubhouses or organisational charts, as other gangs do. However, there is a

certain degree of organisation in the gang and its members are highly criminalised and prone to violence.⁸² Throughout 2019 and 2020, the NNV was involved in several conflicts with different gangs, such as the Brothas, the Satudahar MC and gang groups in Tingbjerg and Sjælør. On 2 January 2021, a 38-year-old NNV member was killed by a Bandidos member. Using a semi-automatic Zastava, the Bandidos rocker fired 11 times at a car that contained four NNV members. In addition to the killing of the 38-year-old man, another 22-year-old NNV member was seriously injured. Shortly after the shooting, the police arrested an 18-year-old Danish man, who was charged with driving the getaway car, and a 21-year-old Swede, who was charged with carrying out the actual killing. Two weeks after the shooting, a Bandido biker found a firebomb under his BMW.⁸³ Before a peace agreement could be reached between the two gangs in the summer of 2021, the first killing incited a violent gun conflict that

included gunfire and violence, in addition to arson attacks (e.g., an attack on a Bandidos clubhouse in Elsinore on 26 January 2021).⁸⁴

The examples of gang-related shootings above also illustrate the availability of guns to gang members.

In response to the biker war between the Bandidos

and the NNV in Denmark, for example, the Bandidos wanted to access their weapons arsenal to arm themselves in preparation for (retaliatory) attacks. But their conversations about accessing their weapons were intercepted by the police and led to the seizure of a Zastava submachine gun, a converted Volga gas gun and 122 pieces of live ammunition.⁸⁵

This is consistent with the findings of international studies, which conclude that the closer gang members are to guns, the greater their risk of gunshot victimisation, in addition to membership increasing the risk and seriousness of criminal involvement.⁸⁶

Implications and conclusions

Using health data from the GBD on physical violence following the involvement of a firearm as a proxy variable, this paper identified Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and Austria as the EU countries with the highest rates of criminal gun violence in the EU. As a previous study on gun violence in the EU found that both the victims and the perpetrators of criminal gun violence are overwhelmingly young men (i.e., under 35), this paper focused on the incidence rate of male victimisation. Using this data as a proxy variable also has its limitations, though, as not all the incidents included in this data are necessarily related to criminal gun violence because in many instances the exact context of the injury or death is not recorded. In addition,

not all victims with an injury related to criminal gun violence seek medical help, which excludes them from public-health records; moreover,

the use of firearms in incidents involving threats is severely under-reported. This gap in the data can be filled partially by information found in media articles, which can

provide a more comprehensive picture of the characteristics of gun violence in different contexts.

The high levels of gun violence in Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands can be attributed (in part) to the drug milieu. The accessibility of drugs via important harbours has attracted criminal groups to import drugs into the EU. This in turn appears to be associated with significant gun violence in conflicts between rival groups over both the illicit commodities and territory. Sweden and Denmark are confronted with significant gang-related gun violence. However, as has been noted, with its focus on drugs, gangs and armed robberies, this paper could not provide an explanation for the high levels of male victimisation by gun violence in Austria. It is plausible that criminal gun violence in Austria is related to other criminal activities not explored here.

This paper also demonstrates that criminal firearm violence is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, and it is not always possible to make a strict delineation between the three contexts discussed here. Activities that entail gangs settling a dispute because of a stolen drug consignment, for example, can be described as gang-related violence, drug-related violence, and theft and/or robbery. The example of gang violence in Sweden vividly illustrates the inherent connection between drug and gang violence. This interconnection also illustrates the reality that gun violence facilitates several different types of crime. A

The examples of gang-related shootings illustrate the availability of guns to gang members.

clear intelligence picture of this phenomenon is key to informing a tailored and comprehensive approach to tackling this security issue.

The findings in this paper also illustrate that online media sources can provide important contextual data which can help to improve the intelligence picture of criminal firearms violence. Understanding the underlying dynamics of a criminal phenomenon is particularly important when developing a targeted strategy to respond effectively to the security threat. A great deal of information on these underlying dynamics can be found in the reconstruction of the development of a phenomenon (e.g., the development of gangs – cf. above). Notwithstanding the valuable information found in media reporting, though, these data also have their limitations. Especially in the reporting on recent incidents there is a risk of misinformation. It has to be noted that, particularly in the more sensationalised media sources, the presentation of the information is based largely on attracting readers rather than portraying a strict and accurate general picture. However, this risk can be mitigated by the triangulation of different media sources reporting on the same incident.

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Authors

Astrid De Schutter

Astrid De Schutter is a researcher at the Flemish Peace Institute. Astrid studied criminology at Ghent University and has experience in policy- and practice-oriented research on the topics of drugs, prison, organised crime and vulnerable people. Her work at the Flemish Peace Institute mainly focuses on firearms violence and the nexus between firearms and drugs.

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) 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.

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