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The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union

Background paper commissioned by the EMCDDA

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Introduction

Firearms trafficking in the European Union (EU) is driven by criminal demand ⁽¹⁾ and is a key enabler for other criminal activities such as drug trafficking ⁽²⁾. Criminals seek to acquire firearms for instrumental purposes, namely to facilitate their criminal activities, where they use guns to threaten, intimidate or assault others (criminals or non-criminals) ⁽³⁾, but they can also be acquired for the reputation afforded through the possession of – especially certain types of – firearms ⁽⁴⁾. Previous studies have shown that handguns are the type of firearm most commonly possessed by criminals in Europe as they are lightweight, easy to conceal and generally reliable. While automatic rifles can also be very effective for intimidation and assault purposes, their possession by criminals is less common ⁽⁵⁾.

Criminal demand for firearms comes from various types of criminals ranging from international drug traffickers, armed robbers, youth gangs involved in street drug dealing, human traffickers, loan sharks, professional assassins and so on. Yet not all criminals have equal access to firearms ⁽⁶⁾. Given that legal access to firearms is almost impossible for criminals in Europe ⁽⁷⁾, they acquire them through other means. These firearms can, for example, be stolen from legal gun owners or state stockpiles, bought from a local criminal arms dealer or trafficked internationally ⁽⁸⁾. Interviews with experts, as well as previous studies, suggest also that the criminal demand for firearms is increasing in various EU Member States ⁽⁹⁾.

Due to the traditionally closed character of illicit gun markets in Europe, firearms are often only accessible to criminals when they have the necessary criminal connections. Younger and less-experienced criminals tend to experience more difficulties in their attempts to acquire firearms. In the past decade, however, law enforcement agencies from various European countries have noted an increased availability of firearms for criminals in their country. Previous studies have linked this to various trafficking methods, including the continuous supply of conflict legacy weapons from the Western Balkans, the increased trafficking in easy-to-reactivate firearms and in easy-to-convert blank-firing weapons and Flobert-calibre firearms ⁽¹⁰⁾. The possibilities generated by the internet have further eroded the closed character of illicit gun markets in Europe. The increased availability of firearms is believed to have ‘facilitated the gradual trickling-down of the possession and use of firearms to lower segments of the criminal hierarchy in several EU Member States, especially in western Europe’ ⁽¹¹⁾.

In 2021 Europol noted that the use of violence in serious and organised crime seemed to be increasing in the EU, both in frequency and severity, augmented by the frequent use of firearms and explosives ⁽¹²⁾. A 2021 comparative study on gun violence in Europe, coordinated by the Flemish Peace Institute, concluded that firearms trafficking in Europe is not only driven by criminal demand, but is also strongly connected to criminal gun violence. The observed increased availability of various types of firearms to criminals has led to an escalation of criminal gun violence in several European countries and sometimes also to arms races among criminals. The study also concluded that shootings in the criminal underworld in Europe are mainly connected to the drugs trade and enabled by firearms trafficking ⁽¹³⁾. A 2018 EMCDDA study on drug-related homicide concluded that this type of homicide is more likely to involve the use of firearms than other means of violence ⁽¹⁴⁾. Findings from project TARGET state that young men (under the age of 35) are the main victims and

perpetrators of lethal gun violence. This is also the case for non-lethal gun violence, but there is a more even age distribution in this category ⁽¹⁵⁾.

In 2019 the EMCDDA and Europol noted that the criminal use of firearms, including automatic weapons, by organised crime groups involved in European drug markets appeared to be increasing ⁽¹⁶⁾. According to Europol, the use of violence related to the trade in drugs – cocaine and cannabis in particular – has escalated in recent years, and the availability of firearms and explosives is a key enabler for this violence ⁽¹⁷⁾. A previous study concluded that more research is needed to uncover the dynamics between drug markets in Europe and gun violence: ‘While there is clearly a link between the illegal drug trade and firearm violence, this connection and its enabling elements are an important avenue for further research’ ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Counteracting drug-related gun violence requires a good intelligence picture of its scope, characteristics and dynamics. The objective of this report is to analyse the nexus between gun violence and the illegal drug market in Europe. To reach this objective, this paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the nexus between firearms trafficking and drug trafficking in the European Union?
2. What are the scope and characteristics of drug-related firearms violence in the European Union?
3. How does this violence impact society?

Research methods

To answer the above research questions, the current study applied a mixed-method approach, including the following components.

- An international **literature review** on drug-related gun violence.
- Analysis of **official criminal and health data** on drug-related firearms violence, as well as **law enforcement analyses and ballistics data**. Data collected as part of project TARGET, which undertook a total of 34 explorative country mappings and seven in-depth country mappings (Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Estonia and Sweden) served as a key starting point. These data were updated by sending out additional data requests to relevant stakeholders in all EU countries.
- **Semi-structured interviews** with experts (researchers, law enforcement) throughout the EU.
- **Case studies** and **media analysis** of drug-related firearms violence incidents in the EU.

The nexus of drugs and violence can manifest as three (not mutually exclusive) forms: psychopharmacological violence, economic-compulsive violence or systemic violence ⁽¹⁹⁾. In this report we will focus on the systemic drug-related gun violence.

The report first discusses the nexus between drug trafficking and firearms trafficking in the European Union, focusing on the strong linkages between both phenomena. When looking at the use of drug-related gun violence, we provide a more in-depth view of the use of gun violence at respectively the wholesale level of the drug distribution chain and the local consumer market, finding the local consumer market to account for most of the visible drug-related gun violence. Where possible, we tried to uncover differences in the use of gun violence related to the type of drug. However, this is quite difficult because the networks involved are often dealing with more than one substance. Nevertheless, it appears that violence is frequently related to the cocaine business. Finally, the report also addresses the societal impact of drug-related gun violence in the EU.

Chapter 1

The nexus between trafficking in drugs and guns in Europe

Strong linkages between firearms and drug trafficking have been observed on a global level. Already in 2001 the United Nations (UN) *Programme of action to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons* (SALW) expressed its concern about the close link between drug trafficking and the illicit trade in SALW ⁽²⁰⁾. In 2008, the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs again noted that drug traffickers are arming themselves with illicitly trafficked firearms and emphasised the need to address the links between the illicit trafficking in drugs and firearms ⁽²¹⁾. This concern has been repeated in a recent resolution in 2022, which encourages states to take appropriate measures to prevent and combat these links, inter alia by enhancing border control management, information exchange and international operational cooperation ⁽²²⁾.

Several international studies have noted that firearms trafficking intertwines with illegal drug trafficking ⁽²³⁾. In their 2020 study on firearms trafficking, for instance, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted that ‘data on significant cases of firearms seizures ... corroborate the strong link between drug trafficking and seized weapons. Aside from weapons-related items such as ammunition, parts and components, and explosives, drugs emerge as the most common commodity seized together with firearms’ ⁽²⁴⁾. A recent study on arms trafficking and organised crime by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) concluded that from a global perspective drugs and firearms markets tend to reinforce each other: ‘The availability of weapons in some regions has led to an arms race in which criminal groups invest their profits into “out-gunning” their rivals and security forces. As gang bosses recognised there were profits to be made in the illicit firearm market, they began setting themselves up as middlemen dealers – using profits from the drug trade to buy and sell firearms not only to their members but also other criminal groups at huge mark-ups’ ⁽²⁵⁾. Interestingly for our analysis, this study mentions that the presence of illicit firearms markets is not only heavily linked to violent crime in Latin America and Africa, but also to drug trafficking in Europe ⁽²⁶⁾.

A recent analysis of firearms trafficking in Europe by the UNODC concludes that criminal drug markets are key drivers for firearms trafficking in Europe ⁽²⁷⁾. A comparison of illicit gun markets across Europe shows that the presence of drug trafficking in a country affects the existence and characteristics of an illicit gun market in that country. According to data provided to the UNODC, on average 28 % of the firearms seizures in Europe occur in the context of drug trafficking. In some EU Member States this figure is as high as 44 % ⁽²⁸⁾.

Firearms trafficking in the EU is **not only driven by drug-related criminal demand**, however, but also connected to the trade in drugs in other ways. First of all, because **firearms are often smuggled together with drugs** by the same criminal networks or, at least, along well-established drug-trafficking routes. According to Europol, ‘firearms trafficking is often a subsidiary activity to drug trafficking’ ⁽²⁹⁾. International firearms trafficking in the EU is traditionally carried out over land by criminals who hide small quantities of firearms in vehicles and smuggle them across national borders ⁽¹⁾. To create these passageways, criminal networks and arms dealers often exploit cultural,

⁽¹⁾ In some countries, firearms and ammunition are also trafficked by boat, especially smaller vessels such as speedboats.

ethnic and familial links to source regions. Most criminal groups involved in firearms trafficking are poly-criminal groups who are also involved in other criminal activities⁽³⁰⁾. This implies that they often make use of the same networks and routes used to smuggle other illegal commodities. The 'Balkan route' is notorious for the trafficking of drugs, firearms and migrants into the EU⁽³¹⁾. Often firearms are trafficked along this route together with other illegal commodities, especially drugs. Given the small quantities of firearms that are smuggled in such trafficking schemes, this activity is traditionally not very lucrative. As a consequence, firearms trafficking is often a supplementary source of income for these poly-criminal groups⁽³²⁾. Second, the strong and increasing drug-related criminal demand for firearms in combination with the exploitation of loopholes in the firearms legislation within the European Union has increased the possibilities for large-scale firearms trafficking, which has resulted in **greater firearms availability** for drug-related criminals.

The trafficking of drugs and firearms along the Balkan route

The Balkan route is a key transit route for both firearms and drugs into the EU⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. This route is an important logistics corridor, with thousands of trucks carrying various goods entering the EU each day. According to Europol, weapons and drugs are often smuggled along this route as part of multi-commodity transfers or hidden in vehicles⁽³³⁾. The Balkan route links the Western Balkans to the EU via a number of branches: (1) by land through Hungary to central Europe and Scandinavia⁽³⁴⁾, (2) by land through Slovenia to north-west Europe⁽³⁵⁾, (3) by sea to and beyond Italy⁽³⁶⁾, (4) by sea to Spain⁽³⁷⁾. The most common drug smuggled via the Balkan route into the EU is heroin⁽³⁸⁾. According to Europol, drug traffickers still use the ancient Silk Road network to smuggle heroin from Afghanistan along the Balkan route into the EU⁽³⁹⁾. Other drugs of note are cocaine, which is trafficked from Latin America, and cannabis, which is either produced in Albania or passes through the Western Balkans from Afghanistan or central Asia (see below)⁽⁴⁰⁾.

The **Western Balkans are an important source region of firearms trafficking** into the EU⁽⁴¹⁾. The firearms moved from this source region tend to be conflict legacy weapons from two primary sources. First, the various conflicts in former Yugoslavia (1991-2001) resulted in the diversion of large quantities of firearms to the civilian population. These '**conflict legacy weapons**' include handguns (such as the Zastava M57 or M70), Kalashnikov-type assault rifles (such as the Zastava M70 assault rifle) and submachine guns (such as the AG Strojnica ERO). Secondly, the Albanian civil war (1997) involved the large-scale looting of the state arms stockpiles of the country. These stockpiles contained various types of weapons, including pistols (such as the TT-33 and Beretta 92) and Kalashnikov-type assault rifles (such as the Norinco type 56)⁽⁴²⁾. For decades now, firearms from the Western Balkans have been trafficked into the EU, often together with drugs. In 2013-2014, for example, several law enforcement agencies from Bosnia and Herzegovina arrested 18 individuals who had been trafficking herbal cannabis and heroin together with firearms into Germany and Sweden through Croatia, Slovenia and Austria⁽⁴³⁾. In 2020-2021, the Austrian police conducted Operation *Zahnfee* (or Tooth fairy), which led to 16 home searches and the seizure of narcotics, weapons and cash. A total of 11 suspects were taken into custody under suspicion of cocaine

⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ Other drug trafficking routes will be discussed in [Chapter 2](#). Drug trafficking from these areas, such as North Africa or South America, do not regularly coincide with firearm trafficking.

trafficking, mainly from Slovenia, into Austria. The suspects came from Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia and Egypt ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Even though countries from the Western Balkans have been taking steps and making strides to counteract firearms trafficking for years now, the problem continues. The 2020 EU action plan on firearms trafficking highlights that the Western Balkans remain a main source region of firearms trafficking into the EU ⁽⁴⁵⁾. According to Europol, firearms from the Western Balkans, where not only conflict legacy weapons but also **human resources with expertise** in firearms are widely available, are trafficked by multinational criminal groups, mainly to Belgium, France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Analyses of the origins of trafficked firearms in these countries confirm that a significant share of these weapons comes from the Western Balkans ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

A recent analysis on the situation in Spain concluded that firearms originating from the Western Balkans do not constitute the largest share of illicit firearms possession in the country, but highlights that these trafficked conflict legacy weapons are shipped in small quantities and mainly used by organised crime groups (OCGs) involved in drug trafficking, and that lower-level criminals often do not have the necessary connections to acquire these weapons ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

A recent analysis of firearms trafficking into Sweden also noted that the Western Balkans have traditionally been and continue to be one of the main sources of illegal firearms trafficked into the country. These weapons are frequently used in drug-related criminal shootings in Sweden. The trafficking in firearms is believed to be facilitated by Balkan criminals living in Sweden. Frequently, hand grenades from the same supplier are smuggled together with firearms into Sweden ⁽⁴⁹⁾. A previous study reported, for example, on the arrest of 11 persons who were accused of being part of an OCG smuggling 10 automatic firearms, 59 pistols and 105 hand grenades by car from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Sweden passing through Austria, Hungary and Germany ⁽⁵⁰⁾.

Various **OCGs and criminal networks** are involved in trafficking drugs and firearms into the EU from the Western Balkans. Previous research indicates that often a connection exists between the actors involved in firearms trafficking and the source country of the smuggled firearms ⁽⁵¹⁾. Italian OCGs, usually mafia or mafia-style groups, have a history of trafficking guns and drugs across the Adriatic Sea, often cooperating with Albanian OCGs ⁽⁵²⁾. In 2021, a Slovenian cell of the Kavački clan was dismantled. This clan is suspected of 81 drugs and weapons smuggling crimes that generated an estimated EUR 2 million in criminal proceeds. They are suspected of carrying out several transports of firearms, and selling at least 790 kilograms of cocaine, 2 249 kilograms of cannabis, 96 kilograms of cannabis resin, 10 kilograms of heroin and 30 litres of amphetamine base. The drugs were transported from Spain and the Netherlands to Slovenia, from Slovenia to Austria, Germany, Italy and Croatia; the firearms from Slovakia to Slovenia, Serbia and the Netherlands. According to the Slovenian police, the goal of this OCG, which communicated through the SkyECC platform, was to traffic as much illicit drugs and firearms as possible to maximise their proceeds ⁽⁵³⁾.

The trafficking of firearms, often in smaller quantities, from the Western Balkans is in general **not very lucrative** for the OCG involved. For them it is mainly a supplementary source of income, next to their more lucrative core criminal activities such as drug trafficking ⁽⁵⁴⁾. According to Europol, 'most groups enter the weapons-trafficking business through other criminal activity, which may offer contacts, knowledge of existing routes and infrastructure related to the smuggling of weapons' ⁽⁵⁵⁾.

Belgian police officials noted that firearms trafficking is perceived as 'high risk-low reward' and that drugs traffickers mainly smuggle firearms for self-protection and as a status symbol ⁽⁵⁶⁾.

Numerous **initiatives continue to be taken to tackle the threat of firearms and drug trafficking** from the Western Balkans. In October 2022, as a coordinated EMPACT Joint Action Days, law enforcement agencies from various European countries targeted the trafficking of firearms, drugs and humans, along the Balkan route. These Joint Action Days led to the arrest of 382 persons, with 38 persons specifically charged with firearms trafficking and 112 persons with drug trafficking. In total 106 firearms and 12 250 pieces of ammunition were seized, but also 15 grenades, one anti-personnel mine and two anti-tank missiles. In addition, 304 kilograms of heroin, 147 kilograms of cannabis, 5 402 cannabis plants and 1.3 kilograms of cocaine were seized. These arrests and seizures allowed the various involved law enforcement agencies to initiate 130 new investigations ⁽⁵⁷⁾. In September 2021, a similar EMPACT Joint Action Days led to the arrest of 330 persons, 37 new investigations and the seizure of 154 firearms (65 pistols, 86 rifles, 3 alarm weapons), 57 hand grenades and other explosives, 2 125 pieces of ammunition, 719 kilograms of cannabis and 920 cannabis plants ⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Fuelling drug criminals with firearms by exploiting legal loopholes

Since the early 2000s firearm traffickers have significantly exploited several legal loopholes, especially in some central and eastern European countries, to legally and at low cost acquire weapons unable to fire live ammunition, modify them into live-firing weapons and resell them to criminals ⁽⁵⁹⁾. European drug criminals have become important customers of the traffickers using these *modi operandi*.

An important legal loophole in the EU was connected to the legal availability of alarm weapons, which were **easy to convert** into live-firing weapons. Until recently such weapons could be acquired legally without the need of a licence in a significant number of EU Member States ⁽⁶⁰⁾.

Most of the converted alarm weapons in the EU from the beginning of the decade were produced in Europe (Germany and Italy in particular) or nearby (Russia). Since 2010, converted alarm weapons of Turkish origin have become prevalent. Most of these Turkish weapons are near-exact replicas of real firearms, built with strong materials and easy to convert ⁽⁶¹⁾. While these weapons have been put under further constraints by the 2017 amendment of the European Firearms Directive ⁽⁶²⁾ and by the Commission Implementing Directive 2019/69 laying down technical specifications for alarm and signal weapons, they have proliferated across Europe for a long time, and some EU Member States might still not be entirely up to date with their legislation ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾.

A large number of EU Member States reported that converted alarm weapons are commonly used in gun crime in their country ⁽⁶³⁾. According to Europol, these weapons have become extremely popular among criminals in Europe due to the fact that they are cheap and easy to convert ⁽⁶⁴⁾. Although these weapons are especially attractive to lower-level criminals, there is growing concern in recent years that OCGs will increasingly acquire and use such weapons ⁽⁶⁵⁾. In Romania, for

⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ In February 2022, the European Commission opened an infringement procedure against Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland and Luxembourg for failing to report on their implementation of Implementing Directive (EU) 2019/69. See: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/inf_22_601.

example, Turkish-made alarm weapons bought in neighbouring Bulgaria have in the past years been used by criminals to protect the trafficking of other illicit goods, such as drugs and cigarettes, and in shootings in the drug milieu in the country ⁽⁶⁶⁾. The drug trafficking in Romania mainly involves cocaine and heroin via the Iran-Türkiye-Bulgaria route ⁽⁶⁷⁾. As we will describe later in this report, converted alarm weapons have been noted in the hands of drug criminals across Europe ⁽⁶⁸⁾.

Another important loophole in firearms legislation that fuelled the proliferation of firearms in the criminal underworld involves **deactivated firearms**, especially ‘acoustic expansion weapons’ ^(iv). Since 2013, converted acoustic expansion weapons, almost always of Slovak origin, have been seized in criminal cases across Europe. Until 2015, acoustic expansion weapons could be acquired in Slovakia without restrictions to persons aged 18 or older ⁽⁶⁹⁾. After the use of such weapons in terrorist attacks in other European countries, for example in the attack on the Hyper Cacher supermarket in Paris in January 2015 ⁽⁷⁰⁾, Slovak legislation was changed, with the prohibition of online sales of these weapons and the required registration of these weapons with the police ⁽⁷¹⁾. Further legislation changes were introduced in Czechia (2021) and Slovakia (2022) to close these loopholes. In the meantime, however, large numbers of acoustic expansion weapons, many of which originated from surplus military stocks, have ended up on illicit gun markets across Europe. According to intelligence sources, one of the Slovak stores selling these weapons sent more than 4 000 packages to 24 EU Member States in 2013-2014 ⁽⁷²⁾. According to media reports, in 2017, Europol estimated that between 2009 and 2014 approximately 10 000 deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons were smuggled from Slovakia to other EU Member States ⁽⁷³⁾. The ease with which these weapons can be legally purchased and converted into live-firing firearms, including automatic firearms, has strongly impacted the criminal availability of firearms in several EU Member States. Seizures related to this trafficking method regularly involve Czech firearms, such as the CZ 75 pistol, CZ vz. 58 assault rifle or the CZ vz. 61 Škorpion submachine guns (SMGs), but also Bulgarian and Romanian AK-47-type rifles ⁽⁷⁴⁾.

The loophole concerning **Flobert-calibre firearms** was identified shortly after the first initiatives were taken to close the loophole of deactivated firearms and acoustic weapons. Flobert-calibre firearms are small-calibre firearms (4 mm or 6 mm) designed in the 19th century for indoor target-shooting. After the introduction of EU common guidelines on deactivation in 2015, some Slovak gun stores decided to convert their deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons into Flobert-calibre weapons. Since Flobert-calibres were at that time not considered as ‘firearms’ in some EU Member States, including Slovakia, these stores were able to continue selling their stocks without many restrictions. Because Flobert-calibre firearms can also easily be converted into higher-calibre firearms, these weapons gained significant popularity quickly and have been seized, in their original state or converted, across Europe ⁽⁷⁵⁾.

Firearms traffickers have exploited these loopholes to provide firearms to drug criminals in various EU Member States. In some countries, this has led to increased criminal gun violence. In Spain, for example, a spike in gun crime in the drug-trafficking milieu in southern Spain between 2018 and

^(iv) Acoustic expansion weapons constitute a specific category of deactivated firearms. These weapons were deactivated so that they would no longer be able to expel a projectile, for example by inserting an obstruction into the barrel, but still have the ability to fire blank ammunition. Given that the firing mechanism remains operational, acoustic expansion weapons are significantly easier to convert into live-firing weapons.

2020 can be attributed to the reactivation of firearms, with deactivated firearms mainly from Spain and Flobert-calibre firearms and acoustic firearms often from eastern European countries, especially Slovakia ⁽⁷⁶⁾.

Historically, firearms trafficking in Europe is not considered very profitable, involves small quantities of weapons trafficked at the same time as other illegal goods, and is mainly carried out as a secondary activity by poly-criminal OCGs. Firearms are very often trafficked for personal use or to meet specific orders from criminals in the destination country ⁽⁷⁷⁾. In recent years, several arrests and seizures of large amounts of converted deactivated firearms, acoustic expansion weapons and Flobert-calibre firearms across Europe (see the box '[Arrests and seizures of large amounts of \(converted\) deactivated firearms, acoustic expansion weapons and Flobert-calibre firearms](#)') suggest that the exploitation of legal loopholes, seems to have partially altered these dynamics. Often these weapons were also destined for drug criminals. A 2018 report on converted weapons, for example, noted the existence of a Polish OCG acquiring acoustic expansion weapons in Slovakia, converting them in Poland and then smuggling them across Europe. Based on investigations into the bookkeeping records of the Slovak gun stores, officials believe that Polish OCGs have purchased up to 2 000 acoustic expansion weapons from Slovak gun stores, which they converted and smuggled to countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These networks were also involved in drug trafficking ⁽⁷⁸⁾.

Arrests and seizures of large amounts of (converted) deactivated firearms, acoustic expansion weapons and Flobert-calibre firearms

In 2019, six individuals in Slovakia were arrested for firearms trafficking. These individuals are suspected of being part of an OCG specialising in the conversion of Flobert-calibre firearms, which supplied over 1 500 firearms to criminals in Europe ⁽⁷⁹⁾.

In the Skåne area in Sweden in 2019, three individuals were arrested for operating a firearms-trafficking network. They purchased a total of 236 deactivated firearms in Slovakia, which they reactivated and sold to young criminal gangs that specialise in drug dealing in Sweden (especially in Malmö and Stockholm). Around half of these firearms were Škorpion submachine guns (SMGs) ⁽⁸⁰⁾.

In February 2020, 22 converted Flobert-calibre firearms were seized in the Netherlands in a transport vehicle on its way to the United Kingdom. This led to a joint investigation supported by Europol and eventually resulted in the arrest of six persons in September/October 2021 in the Netherlands, Czechia and Slovakia. These men are members of an OCG specialised in the conversion of Flobert-calibre weapons and are believed to have trafficked over 1 500 firearms to criminal groups in the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Portugal, Sweden and Czechia. At the time of their arrest, over 350 weapons (including SMGs and assault rifles) and several thousand rounds of ammunition sold by this OCG were seized ⁽⁸¹⁾.

In December 2020, as part of the dismantlement of an international arms-trafficking network, the Spanish Guardia Civil arrested three individuals in Malaga who, in addition to other offences, were suspected of purchasing deactivated and converted firearms in eastern Europe. They would then reactivate the weapons and sell them on to drug traffickers in the south of Spain. Following their arrest, the police seized a total of 160 firearms (including 121 short firearms, 22 AK-47 assault rifles and eight SMGs) alongside more than 10 000 pieces of ammunition, an anti-tank grenade with 15 kilograms of military explosives, eight silencers and 273 magazines ⁽⁸²⁾.

In May 2021, Romanian authorities reported the seizure of 2 850 live-firing pistols with calibre 4 mm and 4.5 mm at the border, concealed in a truck driven by a Ukrainian citizen on its way to Ukraine ⁽⁸³⁾.

Trading drugs for guns

The UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs noted that drug traffickers are sometimes paid with firearms for trafficked drugs, which affords them additional access to a wide range of firearms ⁽⁸⁴⁾. Trading firearms and drugs for one another is also advantageous for criminals, as these transactions do not leave a money trail. Central American criminal groups are believed to easily exchange drugs for firearms ⁽⁸⁵⁾.

In Europe these types of transactions are not frequently observed, but they do occur. The Danish authorities, for example, reported to the UNODC that ‘firearms were often trafficked in conjunction with, or in return for illicit drugs’⁽⁸⁶⁾. In June 2018, Croatian law enforcement arrested 17 members of an OCG that traded Croatian firearms for drugs produced in Germany. During this operation, the police seized 38 firearms (17 pistols, 2 revolvers, 12 long rifles, 2 semi-automatic rifles and 5 automatic Kalashnikov-type rifles) and a rocket launcher (M79 OSA), 130 firearms components and 5 295 pieces of ammunition together with EUR 55 000, USD 21 482 and CHF 15 100⁽⁸⁷⁾. A previous study on firearms trafficking in Croatia noted two additional cases of trading firearms for drugs (in 2003 and 2010). In both cases, members of Croatian OCGs acquired pistols in neighbouring countries and subsequently smuggled them to Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, where they were paid for with cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamines. The drugs were subsequently smuggled to Croatia, where they were sold on the local consumer market. This allowed the Croatian OCG to generate large profits⁽⁸⁸⁾. Interestingly, firearms are not only traded for drugs, but sometimes also the equipment to produce drugs. In a Bosnian-Dutch cooperation in 2006, for example, Dutch criminals offered equipment to cultivate cannabis in exchange for firearms⁽⁸⁹⁾.

The trade of firearms and drugs has also been observed in Italy. A 2013 study on mafia violence in Italy noted that mafiosi also utilise drug-trafficking channels used by networks and suppliers based in eastern Europe and the Western Balkans to acquire firearms, which they paid for with drugs, in particular cocaine⁽⁹⁰⁾. A more recent study on the dynamics of the illicit gun market in Italy confirmed that, after gaining control of supply sources of firearms, Italian mafia groups would not only acquire firearms to commit crimes, but also exchange them for other illicit goods such as drugs⁽⁹¹⁾. Recent Europol-assisted operations in the EU confirm the ample access to both firearms and drugs for Italian mafia groups. In June 2020, for example, the Italian police arrested 12 ‘Ndranghetista for international trafficking of cannabis, cocaine and firearms⁽⁹²⁾, and, in September 2020, the French Gendarmerie and the Italian Carabinieri arrested 46 individuals from France and Italy for their involvement in large-scale drug trafficking and money laundering. The suspects, linked to the ‘Ndrangheta, are believed to have played an active role in cocaine and cannabis trafficking between the Côte d’Azur (France) and Liguria (Italy), with supply chains from Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands. During the house searches, weapons were also seized, and the investigation uncovered the transfer of weapons, including military weapons⁽⁹³⁾.

Outlaw motorcycle gangs are also believed to be sometimes involved in the direct exchange of firearms and drugs. In 2014, for example, five people were arrested in Reims (France) as part of an investigation into drugs and firearms trafficking by the Hells Angels. Several handguns, hunting rifles, ammunition and knives were seized. The police suspect the trafficking was based on an exchange scheme between drugs and firearms⁽⁹⁴⁾.

Firearms trafficking and criminal gun violence in the EU

Criminal violence and firearms are closely intertwined. Europol has noted that in recent years the use of violence by criminals has been increasing in the EU, both in frequency and severity, and that this threat of violence has been intensified by the frequent public use of firearms or explosives. Europol further observed that the use of violence related to the trade in drugs, especially cocaine and cannabis, has escalated recently⁽⁹⁵⁾.

A recent comparative study on gun violence in Europe concluded that criminals use firearms to threaten or shoot others as an offensive or defensive instrument to facilitate criminal activities such as drug trafficking, armed robberies, criminal extortion and human trafficking. Criminal gun violence tends to be focused in some metropolitan areas or specific regions within a country. Compared to domestic gun violence, criminal gun violence is often non-lethal because intimidation is generally the main purpose of the firearms use by criminals. Criminal gun violence, however, is not a homogeneous phenomenon. The findings of the study further suggest that tightly structured OCGs – despite their often-easy access to firearms – tend to have a higher threshold for gun violence compared with loosely structured criminal OCGs, where eruptions of serious gun violence between competing OCGs are more common ⁽⁹⁶⁾. The expert interviews carried out for the current report confirmed the observation that well-organised OCGs try to avoid gun violence as it might attract unwanted attention ⁽⁹⁷⁾.

An important distinction can also be observed in the use of firearms by armed robbers and drug criminals. Armed robberies are mainly carried out with handguns, alarm weapons or even replica guns. In robberies, firearms are mainly used as a scare tactic. Actual shootings during armed robberies are rather rare. As a result, this type of criminal gun violence is seldom lethal or even injurious. Drug-related gun violence, on the other hand, tends to be more often lethal and injurious. Handguns are also believed to be the preferred firearm in drug-related gun violence, but automatic rifles and other types of military-grade firearms are more commonly used than in armed robberies ⁽⁹⁸⁾.

Firearms trafficking is closely linked to criminal gun violence in the EU. Illicit gun markets in the EU are traditionally closed markets with rather limited access to high-quality firearms for lower-level criminals with limited connections. The recent diversification in modus operandi of firearms trafficking has increased the availability of different types of firearms to various types of criminals, including drugs criminals, in several European countries. As a result, lower-level criminals in these countries now also tend to have more access to such firearms and tend to use them quicker. In several countries the combination of increased competition between drugs criminals and easy access to firearms has contributed to an arms race between criminals and higher levels of gun violence ⁽⁹⁹⁾.

Chapter 2

Gun violence at the wholesale level

Firearms trafficking in Europe is largely driven by criminal demand and a strong nexus between firearms trafficking and drug trafficking can be observed (see above). The availability of firearms on criminal markets also fuels drug-related gun violence across Europe. In the following sections we will analyse the dynamics of gun violence in wholesale and consumer markets in the European Union. It is important to make this distinction since the most visible levels of drug-related gun violence in the EU seem connected to the consumer market and its street dealing ⁽¹⁰⁰⁾. Violence is generally less evident at the production and wholesale levels of the drugs market, unless triggered by certain disruptive events.

Wholesale drug markets and differences in gun violence

Drug markets are among the main profit-generating activities of organised crime in Europe. Cannabis is currently the biggest consumer market for illicit drugs in Europe, followed by cocaine which makes up approximately 13 % of the total reported drug seizures. The levels of use and availability of cocaine are currently historically high ⁽¹⁰¹⁾. In addition, heroin and synthetic drugs (such as amphetamine, MDMA and methamphetamine) are important drug markets in the European Union. The previously mentioned studies on gun violence highlight how the characteristics and dynamics of different criminal markets are connected to the availability and use of firearms by criminals. The various wholesale drug markets in Europe are configured differently: while herbal cannabis and synthetic drugs are generally produced within the EU, cocaine, heroin and cannabis resin are generally trafficked into the EU. Depending on the drug, different types of networks are also involved in these wholesale markets. As a result, we can observe significant differences in gun violence related to these specific drug markets.

The **cannabis** market generates high profits. This coincides with the presence of criminal organisations for which drugs are a major source of income ⁽¹⁰²⁾. Herbal cannabis is generally not imported into Europe, but largely produced in the European Union, close to its consumers. The Netherlands, Belgium and, increasingly, Spain are the main producers and distributors of herbal cannabis throughout the EU. As a result, herbal cannabis is generally smuggled over land. In addition, herbal cannabis produced in the Western Balkans, Albania in particular, is smuggled into the EU. Cannabis resin, on the other hand, is generally imported into Europe from Morocco and trafficked either by lorries using the Balkan route, or by sea to several European ports, with Spain being the main entry point, followed by France and Italy. The cannabis trade in the EU often involves crime groups from the Netherlands and Belgium, but North African, Turkish, Bulgarian and Albanian-speaking crime groups are also involved ⁽¹⁰³⁾. Criminal networks dealing in cannabis are generally larger than networks dealing in other types of drugs ⁽¹⁰⁴⁾. These networks tend to be highly organised: 'They are either typically hierarchically structured with roles and levels well-defined around the leadership, or relatively tightly organised but unstructured, and surrounded by a network of individuals engaged in criminal activities' ⁽¹⁰⁵⁾.

The wholesale drug market for **cocaine** in the EU is structured very differently. The large majority of the cocaine available on the European markets is trafficked in maritime shipping containers from Latin America (mainly Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador) and destined for large European seaports

such as Antwerp (Belgium) and Rotterdam (the Netherlands), and to a lesser extent also Algeciras and Valencia (Spain). Yet, smaller ports such as Malta are increasingly being used because of their less stringent security measures. While most of the cocaine is smuggled into the EU in vessels, smaller quantities are also smuggled by airplane. From these entry points, cocaine is further distributed over land (using lorries, personal vehicles and post and parcel services), to the consumer markets, which are mostly located in southern and western Europe ⁽¹⁰⁶⁾. The OCGs responsible for the large-scale trafficking of cocaine from South America primarily operate at the wholesale supply level and are not involved in the consumer drug markets in Europe. These OCGs tend to rely on front companies and corruption to traffic the cocaine via maritime vessels into Europe ⁽¹⁰⁷⁾. While this large-scale cocaine trafficking was historically monopolised by well-organised South American cartels and Italian mafia groups, new players are increasingly participating in the lucrative market (including Albanian-speaking, British, Dutch, French, Irish, Moroccan, Serbian, Spanish and Turkish OCGs) (see below). These smaller OCGs tend to pool their resources within a network of cooperation to organise the trafficking and distribution of cocaine throughout Europe ⁽¹⁰⁸⁾. According to Europol, 'more criminal networks have been reported as being involved in cocaine trafficking than for any other criminal activity' ⁽¹⁰⁹⁾.

Heroin is the most commonly used illicit opioid in Europe ⁽¹¹⁰⁾. The opium from which heroin is made is almost exclusively produced outside of the EU, mainly in Afghanistan, and the drug is generally trafficked into Europe over the Balkan route, by numerous actors including Turkish, Dutch, British and Balkan OCGs ⁽¹¹¹⁾. This is mostly done by land and in a lesser frequency also by maritime containers. The Balkan route remains the key corridor for heroin entry in the EU, but the Southern route faces an increase in trafficking, while the Northern route experiences a decline in activities ⁽¹¹²⁾. As is the case with cocaine, the European heroin market is populated by a multitude of players; however, the wholesale importation into Europe is dominated by Turkish OCGs. Other major players are Dutch, British, Western Balkan, Iranian and Pakistani OCGs ⁽¹¹³⁾.

The market for **synthetic drugs** in Europe is rapidly evolving. Amphetamine, MDMA and methamphetamine are all produced in Europe and largely meet the demand of the European consumer market. The production of these drugs occurs close to the consumer, which entails the presence of local distribution networks, limiting the opportunities for interception. Amphetamine is, after cocaine, the most commonly used illicit stimulant throughout Europe, and its production is concentrated in the Netherlands and to a lesser extent Belgium, under control of Dutch OCGs, from where it is transported by land to other consumer markets in the EU. In addition to supplying the European consumer market, large quantities of the stimulants are exported. The rapidly changing character of the drug market has led to changes in OCG practices and resulted in a greater interaction between groups involved in other areas of the drug market. It is observed that Dutch OCGs are increasingly interacting with criminals of Turkish origin, which leads to a cooperation based on the trade of MDMA and other drugs sent from the Netherlands in exchange for heroin and morphine from Türkiye. Outlaw motorcycle gangs are also expanding their criminal endeavours, getting involved in the production as well as the distribution of synthetic drugs ⁽¹¹⁴⁾.

According to a recent report by the UNODC and Europol, **the growing use of violence related to the wholesale cocaine market in Europe**, including shootings, is connected to developments in South America and changing patterns of large-scale trafficking of cocaine into Europe. After the 2016 peace agreement, an increased fragmentation in the cocaine-related criminal landscape in Colombia can be observed. The involvement of an increasing number of OCGs in the cocaine

production and trade in Colombia seems to have eroded the monopolies of dominant suppliers, who in the past tended to supply cocaine to a limited number of established wholesale traffickers in Europe. This erosion has opened up possibilities for smaller European trafficking networks to gain access to wholesale quantities of cocaine, thereby undermining the competitive advantage of well-established and well-connected OCGs, such as the Italian 'Ndrangheta, who used to dominate the large-scale trafficking of cocaine from South America to Europe. In recent years new alliances between South American suppliers and European criminal networks have been fostered. Such networks are now often able to procure large quantities of cocaine directly from the source instead of using middlemen. Consequently, the main entry points of cocaine into Europe have also shifted. While the Iberian peninsula has for a long time been the most important entry point for cocaine into Europe, recent seizure data indicate the growing importance of Belgium (notably via the port of Antwerp) as an entry point. The Netherlands has remained a relatively stable entry point. It is believed that the majority of the cocaine trafficked to Belgium is intended for OCGs from the Netherlands, from where the cocaine is further distributed across Europe. In addition, OCGs of Moroccan and Albanian ethnicity are reported to have expanded their role in the acquisition of cocaine directly from South America ⁽¹¹⁵⁾.

It appears that most of the drug-related gun violence at the wholesale level is connected to the cocaine market. First, the erosion of monopolies within the cocaine market (cf. above) has increased the number of actors participating in the wholesale market, and thus the competition among them ⁽¹¹⁶⁾. These actors want to defend, and often expand, their share of the drug market. Even though violence at this level is mostly used in a strategic way, gun violence in particular helps them build their reputation and keep the competition at bay ⁽¹¹⁷⁾. Another factor that might explain the excessive use of violence is the length of the production–consumer chain. The drug is distributed through a long chain, over many countries, before it reaches the consumer market. Growing and harvesting the coca plant takes place in lower-income countries with a lower risk of law enforcement intervention than Europe. Even though the risks for smuggling are higher, the land and labour are cheap and the lower risk of interception by the government is less costly. Nevertheless, a long distribution chain also implies the involvement of many people ⁽¹¹⁸⁾. The more people involved, the more risk of something going wrong (e.g. rip-deals). It is theorised that unstable markets are more prone to violence, and this instability in illegal markets often results from conflict between competing criminal networks. Illicit markets with a higher risk of violence are often characterised by the presence of numerous entrepreneurial or freelance actors wanting their share of the profitable market ⁽¹¹⁹⁾. Thus, the recent shift from just a few large networks dominating the cocaine market to a larger number of smaller competing networks may explain the upsurge in violence related to the cocaine market in recent years.

While new networks have become very active in large-scale cocaine trafficking, the traditional Italian mafia-style OCGs have continued their large-scale trafficking activities. As a result of these developments, the availability of cocaine on the consumer market has increased, and the competition between the various criminal networks involved has become much stronger. Currently a wide range of OCGs are involved in the large-scale trafficking of cocaine from South America into Europe. These OCGs originate in Albania, France, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, also Ireland, Poland and Serbia. This thriving cocaine trade in Europe has generated an increase in serious violent incidents such as assassinations, public shootings, bombings, arsons, kidnappings and torture ⁽¹²⁰⁾.

While some OCGs specialise in the trafficking of certain drugs, other OCGs active on the wholesale market are involved in the trafficking of various types of drugs and also have access to firearms and use them in their criminal activities. As a result, there is not always a clear division between the various types of drugs with regard to gun violence. In November 2022, for example, a Europe-wide criminal network of drug traffickers was dismantled, and 44 persons were arrested in Germany, Czechia, France, Slovakia, Latvia, Poland, Norway, Spain and the United States. The network is suspected of trafficking large quantities of cocaine, cannabis and methamphetamine. According to Europol, this network was 'one of the most dangerous in the EU'. During the operation, in addition to large quantities of narcotics, pistols and ammunition were also seized (¹²¹).

Mechanisms inciting gun violence

Well-organised OCGs generally prefer to avoid violence since it is bad for business (¹²²), but various types of disruptive events can trigger gun violence. Criminal groups with a more formalised and tightly enforced structure, such as outlaw motorcycle gangs or mafia-type groups, who adhere to a more hierarchical structure, seem to be more cautious and strategic in their use of violence compared to more loosely structured networks (¹²³). In these tight networks, violence can be used to build a reputation that discourages rivals to attack them or to protect their business. On the other hand, these criminal groups also practice tolerance towards long-time partners in order to maintain a working relationship (¹²⁴). In addition, the use of violence can also attract unwanted law enforcement attention (¹²⁵).

Yet, various types of disruptive events can lower the threshold for or even incite the use of violence among drug criminals. In this regard a distinction can be made between market dynamics that lead to instability and singular events that can trigger violence. The observed increased availability of firearms in several EU Member States, including in countries that play a pivotal role in wholesale drug markets across Europe, enhances the possibilities for the use of firearms in such incidents of criminal violence.

Various market dynamics can lower the threshold for gun violence in Europe. A systematic review of the organisational structure of the illicit drug trade concluded that the majority of OCGs currently involved in drug trafficking are loosely structured (¹²⁶). This finding is further supported by a recent study which states that in countries with a strong state presence, illegal market actors that remain small and ephemeral are more likely to succeed (^{v,127}). This has led to a shift in dominance from very formally organised crime groups towards more loosely structured crime networks, which might offer a partial explanation for the general perception that drug-related firearms violence has increased over the years (¹²⁸).

According to Europol, competition between drug suppliers has intensified in recent years and has led to an increase in drug-related violence (¹²⁹). A growing market tends to attract more groups and individuals to that market, who subsequently have to compete over a finite number of resources with more entrenched groups. Given a general lack of streamlined methods for conflict management, this

(^v) This finding can be illustrated by the decline of the mafia over the last decades, partly due to increased law enforcement presence (Paoli, L. (2020), 'What makes mafias different?', *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research* 49, 141-222. <https://doi.org/10.1086/708826>).

might lead to attempts at intimidation and assault among competitors. This in turn might affect the dynamics of the illegal drug market, rendering it less stable or entirely unstable ⁽¹³⁰⁾.

A clear illustration of this dynamic is the violent incidents connected to the Dutch drug market operations of Ridouan Taghi, who was a small local cannabis dealer who switched to the cocaine trade. He managed to operate in the shadows for a long time ⁽¹³¹⁾. However, he turned up on the police radar after they cracked the encrypted app Ennetcom. Based on the information resulting from this operation, it became clear that Taghi had ordered the murder of various individuals who hindered his business – linking him to at least 20 killings ⁽¹³²⁾. Many attacks were carried out with firearms and involved the murder of thieves ⁽¹³³⁾ and informers ⁽¹³⁴⁾. Taghi is also connected to the killing of a former criminal who became a crime reporter ⁽¹³⁵⁾. He was arrested while hiding in Dubai, which caused problems as the Netherlands – at the time – did not have an extradition treaty with Dubai. One of his ex-associates is a key witness in the trial against him (Marengo trial). The witness's lawyer and a crime journalist close to the witness are believed to have been assassinated under orders of Taghi ⁽¹³⁶⁾. Some of these assassinations were carried out by members of Caloh Wagoh motorcycle gang ⁽¹³⁷⁾, who were also known for threatening third parties in order to convince them to cooperate with the drug-crime groups ⁽¹³⁸⁾. Since his capture, Taghi has made multiple plans to escape and continues to run parts of his crime group from prison ⁽¹³⁹⁾.

As mentioned above, the large quantity of cocaine that is currently being trafficked into Europe is a major factor driving drug criminals to use firearms, hand grenades and torture in acts of violence ⁽¹⁴⁰⁾. More players seeking their part of the profits on the illicit drug market also broadens the pool of potential business partners. The presence of multiple actors makes these criminal networks less reliant on certain individuals and might lower the cost of violence in terms of losing a valuable link in their drug chain ⁽¹⁴¹⁾.

Some of the new players entering the drug market can also be culturally or dispositionally more violence-oriented ⁽¹⁴²⁾. Albanian OCGs are reported to be expanding from cannabis and are taking over large parts of the cocaine market in Europe ⁽¹⁴³⁾, and they are singled out as particularly violent (e.g. the siege of Lazarat) ⁽¹⁴⁴⁾. Reports on organised crime mention increased violence and arming in several EU Member States: in Austria, by individuals from the Middle East, Türkiye and the Western Balkans ⁽¹⁴⁵⁾; in Italy, Nigerian and Turkish OCGs are deemed more violent than entrenched mafia families ^(vi,146); in Greece, Turkish and Albanians are perceived to be particularly prone to gun violence, even against state officials ⁽¹⁴⁷⁾. Portuguese police notes Turkish and Albanian groups as particularly violent ⁽¹⁴⁸⁾.

Sudden events of market instability can lead to gun violence. For instance, a COVID-19-related reduction in the supply of cocaine on the Portuguese market is believed to be connected to a recent rise in drug-related shooting incidents in Lisbon ⁽¹⁴⁹⁾.

Law enforcement interventions can also destabilise the existing drug market. Law enforcement can have a centrifugal effect on drug crime through focusing their attention on certain drug-transit routes

^(vi) The notable exception being the mass shooting in 2008 by a Camorra mafia clan of seven African immigrants in Castel Volturno to dissuade African drug traffickers from encroaching on their territory: 'Castel Volturno commemorated 6 Ghanaians murdered in 2008', *InfoMigrants* 21 September 2021: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/35184/castel-volturno-commemorated-6-ghanaians-murdered-in-2008>.

causing drug-trafficking organisations to relocate and thus creating a spill-over effect on other locations, intensifying their interactions and potential for violence (also called the ‘balloon-effect’) ⁽¹⁵⁰⁾. On the other hand, law enforcement can also have a centripetal effect on drug crime, when they disrupt the capacities of certain criminal groups to defend themselves and their territories (or take them out entirely). By disrupting the military balance between rival drug-trafficking organisations, they indirectly improve the position of its rivals, causing an imbalance in territorial stability and potentially attracting competing drug-trafficking organisations or splinter groups who then try to claim dominance over the domain ⁽¹⁵¹⁾.

The centripetal effect on drug crime of law enforcement is currently observed throughout north-western Europe and could account for some recent gun incidents in drug crime. The main reason for these incidents can be traced back to the police infiltration of the encrypted messaging networks used by criminals. This started with a global operation led by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, who developed and maintained an encrypted device company called ANOM. This infiltration led to the discovery and dismantling of several criminal networks ⁽¹⁵²⁾. Subsequent hacking of other encrypted apps included Encrochat/Ennetcom and SkyECC. The information in these chats provided law enforcement with enough material to organise targeted operations resulting in large seizures of drugs, firearms and cash, and arrests of both prominent and less prominent drug traffickers ⁽¹⁵³⁾.

The law enforcement operations resulting from the hacking of Sky ECC have likely contributed to the recent escalation in drug-related gun violence in Antwerp. The **summer of 2022 in Antwerp** was plagued by shootings and explosions connected to drug crime. Drug violence is not uncommon in Antwerp: between 2015 and August 2022, 141 serious incidents were reported in Antwerp, including shootings and the use of hand grenades ⁽¹⁵⁴⁾. Yet, in recent years the number of incidents has increased spectacularly. Sixty incidents were reported between January and mid-August 2022, with 30 of them between June and mid-August, compared to a total of 30 incidents in 2021. According to the minister of interior affairs and the head of the federal police unit of Antwerp, this recent upsurge in violence is believed to be partially connected to the SkyECC operation. The information retrieved via this operation has resulted in the start of dozens of investigations and the arrest of several key persons and facilitators within the local drug-trafficking networks. To fill these holes in the network, new persons, including port employees, had to be recruited by the OCGs, either financially or under threat. As a result of working with new persons at critical spots in the trafficking network, sometimes a shipment of cocaine has been lost, resulting in repeating incidents of violence, including shootings, torture and kidnappings ⁽¹⁵⁵⁾.

Certain **singular incidents** – such as the loss or theft of drugs – can also give rise to sudden bursts of gun violence in the drug milieu ⁽¹⁵⁶⁾. These incidents can create animosity between crime groups or can cause splinter groups to emerge with a violent disposition towards their mother group. In 2014, for example, 200 kilograms of cocaine was stolen from the apartment of a member of the Montenegrin Kavačkog clan in Valencia (Spain) ⁽¹⁵⁷⁾, allegedly by the rival Škaljarski clan ⁽¹⁵⁸⁾. Following the theft, at least 41 individuals were killed in several retaliatory incidents of gang violence ⁽¹⁵⁹⁾. One attack in 2016 involved the assassination of two men who were gunned down by hired hitmen while having dinner with their families in Athens, Greece ⁽¹⁶⁰⁾. Another incident involved the assassination of several members of the Škaljarski clan in Vienna by a hitman who had worked for both clans ⁽¹⁶¹⁾. The respective leaders of the clans both survived assassination attempts ⁽¹⁶²⁾. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) links this conflict to

assassinations in Greece, Montenegro, Germany, Spain, Serbia and the Netherlands ⁽¹⁶³⁾. Such singular events can fuel gun violence for years to come. In 2012, for example, the theft of roughly 200 kilograms of cocaine by a young gang of Antwerp drug extractors – nicknamed ‘The Turtles’ – led to numerous lethal and non-lethal shootings between various Dutch crime groups and the Antwerp group in the following years ⁽¹⁶⁴⁾.

Geography of gun violence related to wholesale markets

The wholesale drug markets in Europe tend to be situated in a limited number of EU Member States. The Netherlands and Belgium, in particular, play an important role because of their position as a key entry point for cocaine and the large-scale production of herbal cannabis and synthetic drugs, but countries such as Spain and Italy are also home to important wholesale drug markets. Not surprisingly, a recent study on gun violence in Europe concluded that in these countries clear linkages between firearms trafficking, wholesale drug markets and gun violence can be observed ⁽¹⁶⁵⁾.

The Netherlands and Belgium

Ports play a vital role in drug trafficking, especially for cocaine, and their surrounding areas can fall victim to various forms of gun violence. The port of Rotterdam was traditionally a primary destination port for cannabis trafficked from Morocco, as the lenient attitude of the country’s legal framework towards the substance holds fewer risks compared with other European countries ⁽¹⁶⁶⁾. Because of its size and its efficient handling of commodities, the Rotterdam port was also particularly suited to become a receiving port for cocaine from South America ⁽¹⁶⁷⁾. In the past decade, the neighbouring port of Antwerp (Belgium) also became a key entry point for cocaine into the EU ⁽¹⁶⁸⁾.

An analysis of the crime statistics for Rotterdam suggests there are clear overlaps between cases of drug offences, homicides, arms trafficking and public violence. In particular, the areas of Rotterdam Centrum, Feijenoord, Delfshaven and Charlois seem to be plagued by these offences ⁽¹⁶⁹⁾. This interconnection between arms trafficking and organised drug crime in the Netherlands is noted also in previous research ⁽¹⁷⁰⁾, in which the authors warn of a possible arms race among criminals ⁽¹⁷¹⁾. The kind of violence that is seen in Rotterdam often involves a shooting or throwing grenades at houses and tends to be contained among criminals ⁽¹⁷²⁾. Part of the reason why Rotterdam and Amsterdam are disproportionately affected by drug-related gun violence seems to be linked to historically insufficient police attention for drug and gun trafficking, potentially combined with the perceived lax punishment of drug offences, especially for underage offenders ⁽¹⁷³⁾. While historically focused on herbal cannabis and cannabis resin (to a lesser extent, heroin) and orchestrated by local crime lords ⁽¹⁷⁴⁾, much of the gun violence nowadays seems to be related to the cocaine trade and is executed by more diverse actors ⁽¹⁷⁵⁾.

The wholesale cocaine market in Belgium and the Netherlands is intrinsically linked and has led to numerous acts of gun violence between the criminals involved (see below). Moreover, with regard to the production of cannabis and synthetic drugs, strong linkages between the Netherlands and Belgium can be observed. While synthetic drugs are produced largely by family-based networks in the border area, cocaine trafficking is done by diverse, multinational small networks ⁽¹⁷⁶⁾. The cocaine trade was historically orchestrated – even in Belgium – by Dutch nationals, but a Belgian study found that Belgian criminals have been increasingly involved in recent years ⁽¹⁷⁷⁾. For a long

time Dutch OCGs dominated the cocaine trafficking through the port of Antwerp, with Belgians carrying out the smaller tasks. This situation, however, has changed. The high-level actors currently involved in cocaine trafficking in Antwerp are no longer dependent on the OCGs they used to work for. These persons have grown up in the city but now operate from abroad, for example Dubai or Türkiye, as key players in the trafficking networks ⁽¹⁷⁸⁾.

The recent TARGET study confirmed a disproportionately high rate of shootings in the Netherlands. While homicides in the Netherlands generally have decreased significantly since the 1990s, gun homicides have remained more or less stable ⁽¹⁷⁹⁾. Between 2018 and 2021, the Dutch police *Firearm Dashboard* recorded an annual average of 621 shootings (20 % of these causing injuries) ⁽¹⁸⁰⁾. The Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor notes that 80 % of shootings linked to the criminal milieu in the Netherlands are explicitly connected to the drug milieu ^(vii). Most of these shootings are non-lethal, occur in a public space and are motivated by financial disputes or revenge ⁽¹⁸¹⁾. For a number of these shootings, we received the brands and types of the guns involved. Over half of these firearms were handguns with a diversity of brands, most prominently Yugoslav pistols such as the Zastava M70, M57 and M88, Czech pistols such as the CZ 85, and a number of unspecified Glock pistols; although fewer in number, automatic firearms include mainly AK-47 type firearms (Zastava M70 and unspecified), but also Croatian-made SMG (Agram 2000), Uzi SMG and Czech automatic firearms (CZ vz 58 and CZ vz 61); finally, an increasing amount of converted alarm weapons, all of the Zoraki brand (Zoraki M906, Zoraki 914 and Zoraki Streamer) were identified ⁽¹⁸²⁾. These types of firearms align with the types of guns being trafficked in the trafficking streams we have described in [Chapter 1](#), except for the Glock which is a firearm that is sought after by drug criminals as very prestigious.

The firearms used in the Belgian drug milieu are very similar to those used in the Netherlands ⁽¹⁸³⁾. We note a large majority of handguns, mostly pistols. A large component of these older Belgian-made FN pistols, such as the FN 1910 and FN 1922, could have been stolen from legal owners. We also note the use of conflict legacy firearms, which were likely smuggled from the Western Balkans (such as Zastava M57/70 or Beretta 70/92 pistols); in addition, we note a number of reactivated CZ pistols and a small number of Glock 17 or 19 pistols, which are very sought after by drug criminals. Regarding assault rifles and machine guns, we particularly note the use of conflict legacy firearms (Zastava M70 and Norinco 56), but also reactivated weapons, such as the CZ vz. 61 and 58 ^(viii). This suggests that a significant number of guns used in drug crime in Belgium are trafficked internationally, especially from south-eastern and eastern Europe ⁽¹⁸⁴⁾.

Interestingly, three quarters of people arrested for the recent upsurge in drug-related incidents of violence in Antwerp since the summer of 2022 (cf. above) are Dutch nationals and might have been sent by Dutch drug criminals ⁽¹⁸⁵⁾. One series of incidents concerned two brothers who are believed to have stolen a large shipment of cocaine. The brothers had earlier been arrested in a SkyECC case, but were acquitted. Since then, their home has been the target of multiple shootings and

^(vii) Data received following inquiry at Leiden University; <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/governance-and-global-affairs/isga/dfvm---coding-manual-marieke-liem.pdf>.

^(viii) While some (converted) alarm pistols are analysed ballistically in Belgium, none are specifically linked to drug crime. The absence of these from ballistic analysis is not necessarily a sign of their absence. This could be because ballistic analyses of the linear grooves of bullets expelled from converted alarm pistols are usually not suited to ballistic comparison. See: Vanden Auweele, D., De Labbaye, Q. and Duquet, N. (2022), *Vuurwapengeweld in België. Op zoek naar een completer beeld*. Brussels, Vlaams Vredesinstituut, 30: <https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/20220608-VVI-VuurwapengeweldBE.pdf>.

explosions. The brothers themselves have been beaten up while on holiday in Türkiye⁽¹⁸⁶⁾. The restaurant of the family of another drug criminal was hit by at least four explosions. As one member of his gang has gone missing, these attacks might serve as warnings towards the targeted criminal to keep silent and not inform the police of this member's whereabouts⁽¹⁸⁷⁾. Another criminal has been the target of multiple pyrotechnics, shootings and other forms of vandalism of his family's restaurant. He is believed to have stolen a large shipment of drugs⁽¹⁸⁸⁾.

Other European countries

Not only in the Netherlands and Belgium have the entry points for drug trafficking been the scene of gun violence, but also in other European countries. Since 2019, for example, the French port of Le Havre is also increasingly being used for cocaine trafficking⁽¹⁸⁹⁾, which has led to a shooting between police and cocaine traffickers in April 2022⁽¹⁹⁰⁾. The German port of Hamburg is also receiving large amounts of cocaine⁽¹⁹¹⁾, and has attracted some gun violence⁽¹⁹²⁾. Sea ports in Mediterranean Europe are also entry points for large-scale drug trafficking. OCGs in Italy tend not to be particularly interested in 'governing' these port areas (with the exception of the port of Gioia Taura)⁽¹⁹³⁾, but make instrumental use of them and are very flexible in shifting operations to different ports⁽¹⁹⁴⁾. The Greek port of Piraeus is increasingly being subjected to various forms of organised crime, largely because of its increasing efficiency in transiting cargo⁽¹⁹⁵⁾.

Interestingly, Project TARGET observed that Andalusia, home to Algeciras, the most important port in Spain, and Valencia, home to the second most important port in Spain⁽¹⁹⁶⁾, account for the bulk of all gun crime in Spain⁽¹⁹⁷⁾. Expert interviews suggest that European OCGs set up shop in southern Spain to organise better the supply of drugs⁽¹⁹⁸⁾. This has led to several cases of money laundering of drug money in southern Spain⁽¹⁹⁹⁾. Frequently, firearms are seized from such OCGs in southern Spain. In September 2022, for example, the Spanish and Italian authorities arrested 32 persons in an operation targeting two OCGs with suspected links to the 'Ndrangheta and believed to be involved in drug trafficking, money laundering and extortion. One of the targeted OCGs is suspected of using sailing boats to traffic large quantities of cocaine from South America to be sold in Ibiza. In this operation, 18 kilograms of amphetamine and 4.5 kilograms of cocaine were seized, as well as firearms and ammunition⁽²⁰⁰⁾.

Spanish law enforcement agencies report an increase in the availability of military-grade firearms in the southern area⁽²⁰¹⁾, which they link to an arms race between competing OCGs, including Dutch, Swedish, Italian and Serbian OCGs. While handguns remain the weapon of choice⁽²⁰²⁾, these groups also use automatic rifles⁽²⁰³⁾. The supply of these firearms can happen through various methods, such as trafficking from the Western Balkans, but also firearm reactivation, theft or conversion (see above). The OCGs active in southern Spain who have access to firearms seem to have a larger disposition for violence, which has resulted in more incidents of gun violence. This involves mostly armed robberies or intimidation attempts between drug criminals⁽²⁰⁴⁾. One common practice among these OCGs is *vuelcos*, which are drug thefts between rival drug groups, where armed raids on warehouses can result in shoot-outs between gangs⁽²⁰⁵⁾.

Chapter 3

Gun violence related to the local consumer markets

Once the trafficked drugs have reached their final destination (the consumer market), different actors and dynamics come into play in order to get the drugs to the end user. There are four large illicit drug consumer markets in the EU (see the box '[Consumer markets in the EU](#)'). It is this consumer level that accounts for the most visible violence ⁽²⁰⁶⁾.

The large quantities of drugs supplied via these illicit drug markets generate billions of euro. This coincides with the presence of criminal organisations for whom drugs are a major source of income ⁽²⁰⁷⁾. These high profits are especially attractive to certain young people living in socially vulnerable or disadvantaged areas, individuals who are constantly striving for wealth, status and a purpose in life. Many of these young people end up joining a criminal gang that promises to fulfil all their needs and wants ⁽²⁰⁸⁾. Competition in the consumer sales for drugs can be intense, and the demise of one criminal organisation provides opportunities for rival gangs to fill in the gap and claim their dominance over a segment of the consumer drug market ⁽²⁰⁹⁾. In addition, a previous American study found that gang members are more likely than other criminals to carry a gun, which in turn increases the likelihood to be involved in gun-related crimes ⁽²¹⁰⁾.

Consumer markets generating the most visible violence

In recent years, several regions of Europe have experienced an upsurge in violent drug-related incidents, which seems to be driven by young drug criminals carrying firearms ⁽²¹¹⁾. There are several **market characteristics** that influence this increase in drug-related violence.

First, it appears that **open drug markets are more prone to violence than closed drug markets**. Open drug markets are characterised by their **accessibility**: all buyers can get their products without prior introduction to the seller ⁽²¹²⁾. Open use and dealing of drugs tends to be accompanied by an array of crime and public nuisance problems. As these drug markets are illicit, the actors involved in the drug trade do not enjoy the government protection provided to legal market participants and resort to their own means of conflict resolution ⁽²¹³⁾. In this scenario, violence is used as a selective tool for market regulation ⁽²¹⁴⁾. Since firearms in this context are mainly used as a tool for protection and intimidation ⁽²¹⁵⁾, firearms violence is strongly concentrated in open drug markets, compared to closed drug markets ⁽²¹⁶⁾. A spokesperson of the police department of Brussels South, for example, one of the Belgian neighbourhoods that is increasingly plagued by drug violence, notes a coinciding increase in open drug dealings in the area and refers to several neighbourhoods parks that are currently serving as 'drug hotspots' ⁽²¹⁷⁾.

Consumer markets in the EU

At present, **cannabis** remains the biggest consumer market for illicit drugs in Europe, with an estimated 79 million European adults (aged 15 to 64 years old) indicating to have used cannabis at least once in their life. Of the EU inhabitants between 15 and 34 years old, it is estimated that 15.5 % have used the drug in the past year ⁽²¹⁸⁾. A conservative estimation of the consumer market notes a worth of at least EUR 11.6 billion ⁽²¹⁹⁾.

Cocaine is the second biggest consumer market for drugs in Europe and is historically concentrated in the western and southern parts of the continent. To date this seems to remain the case, as France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain (together representing about 61 % of the total EU population) account for 77 % of Europe's estimated cocaine users (between 15 and 64 years old) in 2021. Though reporting much lower estimations, Denmark and Sweden follow suit. The largest cocaine market in eastern Europe appears to be Poland, though a lack of recent general population survey data in this part of Europe warrants caution when making this statement. The minimum estimated value of the consumer market for cocaine in the EU in 2020 was EUR 10.5 billion ⁽²²⁰⁾.

The **heroin** market is the largest opioid consumer market in the EU. In 2017, it was estimated that there are about 1 million high-risk opioid users (between 15 and 64 years old) in the EU, coinciding with an estimated retail value of the heroin market of at least EUR 7.4 billion ⁽²²¹⁾.

In most, but not all EU countries, amphetamine is the preferred drug over methamphetamine, with the latter being used more in northern and central Europe. The use of MDMA is more generally diffused. The **synthetic drug** business can be highly profitable as well, as the amphetamine and methamphetamine consumer market was estimated to be worth at least EUR 1 billion and the MDMA consumer market about EUR 0.5 billion ⁽²²²⁾.

Markets with a **closed** character are defined by their **level of trust** between buyer and seller and their presence is largely dependent on the level of threat posed by the police ⁽²²³⁾. Buyers and sellers only do business with each other when they know and trust each other, or when they are introduced by a trusted third party ⁽²²⁴⁾. An example of this dynamic is the phone dealings between buyer and seller. Both parties contact each other via mobile phones and encrypted apps and meet at pre-arranged locations or the seller makes home deliveries ⁽²²⁵⁾. Because of this high level of trust, closed drug markets seem to be less prone to violence ⁽²²⁶⁾. Nevertheless, even dealings arranged to take place at the home of the dealer sometimes turn violent. In Italy, for example, on 27 December 2019, a young man (28) shot at two men who came to his home to buy cocaine, killing one and seriously injuring the other. The dealer claimed that the duo refused to pay for the drugs and during the scuffle that followed, he succeeded to get his hands on the gun of one of the men.

He shot the man in the chest and chased the other one, shooting him in the head as he tried to get into his car ⁽²²⁷⁾.

A recent Swedish study concluded that open drug markets are most prevalent in **socially vulnerable or disadvantaged areas**. A weak connection to family and school is a recurring theme in the childhood narratives of individuals who are active in a criminal milieu dominated by gun violence. These individuals do not seem to make a conscious choice to participate in the criminal milieu, but experienced this rather as a daily element of their lives in these residential areas. For these young people, the milieu holds promises of money, social status and an available career path. They are not specifically recruited by a gang, but transition into participation in the criminal milieu through socialising with friends who are criminally active ⁽²²⁸⁾. In their study on police perception of power structures and criminal markets, Brå states that the organisational structure in socially disadvantaged areas is often not very formalised and is built up around certain authoritative actors who arbitrarily formulate the rules and principles on a case-by-case basis. Conflicts and power struggles are very common within these groups who, as a consequence, have loose and changeable structures (cf. below). Because these groups are structured around single authoritative actors, the decision to resort to violence is typically taken by the single authority figure and often occurs spontaneously, without prior deliberation ⁽²²⁹⁾.

Vulnerable areas are also marked by the manifestation of near-repeat-shootings. The near-repeat principle refers to the **spatio-temporal proximity of crime incidents**. It is based on the assumption that when a crime is committed, there is an increased risk that another, similar type of crime will happen nearby and within a short time ⁽²³⁰⁾. When examining shootings, several studies in the United States have found conclusive evidence of this phenomenon and state that the risk for gun violence at a location is substantially elevated in the weeks after a shooting ⁽²³¹⁾. In Europe, a previous study found a **significantly increased risk of new shootings** in all three Swedish cities under study: Stockholm, Malmö and (to a lesser extent) Gothenburg ⁽²³²⁾. There are two mechanisms which might provide an explanation for this phenomenon. The *flag mechanism* implies that the affected location is temporarily more vulnerable and consequently attracts other criminals. The *boost mechanism* suggests that specific offenders become aware of vulnerabilities of the target while committing the crime and exploiting these vulnerabilities, the same criminals return to commit other crimes ⁽²³³⁾. The authors of the study hypothesised that the latter is the most likely mechanism to influence the near-repeat patterns of shootings, but they did not find conclusive evidence ⁽²³⁴⁾.

Younger criminals seem to be more violent than older criminals. The prevalence and degree of violence is dependent on the actors' views on life chances, cultural mores and their views on conflict resolution ⁽²³⁵⁾. When considering **the age of the criminals**, it is perceived that younger criminals resort to violence more easily than older criminals ⁽²³⁶⁾. A recent example reports a 15-year-old Dutch boy being investigated for his involvement in multiple explosions related to the drug war, going on in the autumn of 2022 in Antwerp and its surrounding municipalities ⁽²³⁷⁾. Another example is the conviction, in May 2021, of two men in their twenties and two teenage girls for aiding and abetting the murder of a man in the residential area Oxhagen in Örebro (Sweden) in the summer of 2020. The police believe that drug dealings are at the base of the conflict that led to the shooting ⁽²³⁸⁾. This is especially concerning considering that young and inexperienced criminals seem to have easier access to firearms due to their increased availability on the criminal market (cf. below) ⁽²³⁹⁾. Findings from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention suggest that the criminal violence primarily serves to build a reputation in the pursuit of status and power ⁽²⁴⁰⁾. An

example of this **violence for status** is the shooting of a man, the result of which is captured afterwards in a photo. The image depicts an injured man with a blood-stained t-shirt lying next to a car. The car is shot at several times and the man is lying in an unnatural position. It is believed that the photo was taken by the perpetrator himself. He is also reflected in the photo: a faceless figure wearing grey adidas trousers, holding an automatic weapon and pointing its barrel at the victim. These perpetrators document the last seconds of their rival's life and spread these humiliation and abuse videos via social media ⁽²⁴¹⁾. For these types of perpetrators, gun violence is often an investment in one's criminal career and, as such, firearms are a highly valued commodity ⁽²⁴²⁾.

Firearms availability leads to a vicious circle of trafficking and violence

Coinciding with this increase in violence, several studies by the UNODC and the Flemish Peace Institute have reported an increase in firearms availability on criminal markets in certain countries, making these weapons accessible **to low-level and even very young criminals** ⁽²⁴³⁾. In the weekend of 12 November 2022, for example, the Belgian police halted two minors of 15 and 16 years old on a motorcycle. The passenger (15) carried 15 grams of cannabis, a precision scale, empty little bags and a substantial amount of cash with him. As these elements raised suspicions of drug dealings, the police searched, under warrant, the house of the suspect and found several amphetamine pills, cannabis resin and a firearm ⁽²⁴⁴⁾. During a search of a home in The Hague, the Dutch police found cocaine, heroin and MDMA (totalling 6 kilograms of drugs) and cutting agents in addition to four firearms. Following this find, six men were arrested ⁽²⁴⁵⁾. OCGs involved in the drug trade can also get their hands on military-grade firearms. An OCG operating in central Poland for example, resorted to the use of firearms to extort dealers and ensure their monopoly in drug trafficking. For this, they stored an arsenal of about 40 firearms in a warehouse in Konstantin which included 7.62 mm machine guns, 'Škorpion' submachine guns, TT type and CZ guns ⁽²⁴⁶⁾. For some regions in Spain, especially in the south, the police report that drug criminals are increasingly using automatic firearms ⁽²⁴⁷⁾. In some cases, even young criminals are able to get their hands on these types of weapons. For example, on Thursday 18 November 2022, two young men (19 and 25) threatened a third person with military-grade weapons, which they later even directed towards the Belgian police who responded to the call ⁽²⁴⁸⁾.

The rise in firearms violence in certain neighbourhoods creates an increasingly hostile and dangerous environment for criminals and residents alike. As described in [Chapter 2](#), there are several **disruptive events** that can trigger a sudden outburst of violence or even a full-blown drug war: growing markets and coinciding high profits might attract more competitors, targeted actions of theft by rivalling gangs might require a retaliatory response, or law enforcement interventions might weaken an organisation's ability to protect its territory and assets. One such major disrupting event in Belgium (and surrounding countries) was the police cracking the messaging app SkyECC. The ramifications of this event on the wholesale level are described in [Chapter 2](#), but the consequences of this police breakthrough also affected the retail level. The information gained through the SkyECC operation led to a serious disturbance of the organisation of the drug market, and the arrests related to the operation fuelled increased competition among the actors at retail level ⁽²⁴⁹⁾. In the first six months of 2022, a total of 22 shootings were reported in Brussels alone ⁽²⁵⁰⁾. According to police findings, a great deal of these shootings are to be categorised as settlements in the drug milieu and can in some cases even be specifically linked to the SkyECC operation ⁽²⁵¹⁾. The majority of these incidents resulted in injuries, but only one of them had a fatal outcome. This is not a surprising

finding considering that the main goal of these drug-related shootings is to scare and threaten the competition ⁽²⁵²⁾.

To prepare for such disruptive events, drug criminals are arming themselves with firearms. In an environment of constant threat and fear, these guns provide a sense of security ⁽²⁵³⁾. These dynamics of '**guns for protection**' do not stay contained within the criminal milieu and its actors. The increased need of 'guns for protection' further impacts the local illicit firearms market and generates a parallel increase in criminal demand and a matching rise in firearms trafficking. This higher availability of firearms increases the criminal access to firearms, which increases the number of armed criminals on the street. This then increases the lethality of the drug violence, which causes criminals to live in fear of being shot, which increases the demand for 'guns for protection', which in turn increases the demand for firearms and so on. This dynamic creates a vicious circle of guns and fear fuelling violence and firearms trafficking ⁽²⁵⁴⁾.

A practical illustration of this increased accessibility is the **drug-related shootings in Marseille**. In the spring and summer of 2021, Marseille had to deal with a period of extreme and particularly deadly violence stemming from an established and long-standing drug milieu that had persisted for over a decade ^(255,256).

In mid-September 2021, an inspector of police of the drug brigade reported 16 deaths related to the drugs milieu since the beginning of spring 2021 ⁽²⁵⁷⁾. The victims and perpetrators are often very young, low-level members from the poor areas of Marseille ⁽²⁵⁸⁾. Young people from all over France come to Marseille and its suburbs looking for a better future and hoping to make fast and easy money ⁽²⁵⁹⁾. It appears that drug trafficking in Marseille mainly revolves around herbal cannabis and cannabis resin ⁽²⁶⁰⁾. The police of Marseille report a strong link between drug trafficking and firearms trafficking, stating that you cannot have a drug-trafficking case without a coinciding case of firearms trafficking ⁽²⁶¹⁾. A working example supporting this statement is a raid at the beginning of August 2021 as part of a police investigation into violent incidents in the Northern Quarters of Marseille. This resulted in the seizure of 18 firearms (of which seven were Kalashnikov-type weapons), more than 3 000 rounds of ammunition, 20 kilograms of cannabis resin and EUR 10 000 in cash. Nine persons between 20 and 30 years old were arrested ⁽²⁶²⁾. The high prevalence of firearms evident in Marseille coincides with the findings that the deadly drug violence in Marseille often involves a shooting ⁽²⁶³⁾. Many of these shootings appear to be gang-related ⁽²⁶⁴⁾, pertaining 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 was a settlement between drug-trafficking gangs) ⁽²⁶⁵⁾ or retaliation for theft, such as the Nigerian man who was suspected of stealing a bag with a few grams of cannabis resin and a handful of euro, and who was shot to death ⁽²⁶⁶⁾. The boss of the drug gang wanted to set an example ⁽²⁶⁷⁾. On the other hand this violence also affects people who are not directly involved in these drug dealings (see also [Chapter 4](#)) ⁽²⁶⁸⁾. On 8 July 2021, a young man, his girlfriend and her friend were shot at by two individuals. The young man was shot in the shoulder, his girlfriend remained unharmed, but her friend was hit by a bullet in the head and succumbed to her injuries while being transported to hospital. It appeared that the shooters were gunning for the young man who was involved in some drug-related business ⁽²⁶⁹⁾.

A previous study on the illicit gun market in France highlights that internationally sourced firearms are often trafficked 'on demand' for criminals. These are mainly weapons from post-conflict

countries, trafficked by road and in small packages. In recent years, the international trafficking of convertible Turkish-origin replica firearms has been of concern, as these weapons (e.g. blank-firing, alarm and trauma guns) can often easily be converted to fire live ammunition (see above). These weapons are sometimes converted in France, but often also in clandestine workshops run by national OCGs, mostly in Albania, Kosovo ^(ix) and North Macedonia. In addition, firearm components are also trafficked to France via postal packages, for example from the United States, and used to assemble firearms in France. Other sources included the exploitation of legal loopholes in other European countries (e.g. deactivated firearms), the theft from legal owners and the online sales of firearms ⁽²⁷⁰⁾.

Sweden as a deadly hotspot of drug-related gang violence

In contrast to other European countries, where firearm homicide rates declined between 2000 and 2020, **Sweden** has experienced an increase in both firearm-related homicides and firearm use in homicides ⁽²⁷¹⁾. This increase already started in the 1990s, but manifested itself more drastically between 2011 and 2016 ⁽²⁷²⁾. This increase in firearms violence is due in part to the increased availability of illegal firearms coming from the Western Balkans, and in part to the marked rise of criminal gangs, groups and networks in Sweden during the 1990s ⁽²⁷³⁾. In addition to this increase in the use of firearms, the violent crimes appear to have become more serious, with a study reporting a 2 % yearly increase of firearm-related homicides in males. The number of firearm-related non-fatal injuries requiring hospitalisation appears to be increasing by 4 % per year⁽²⁷⁴⁾. Several in-depth studies concluded that the shootings in Sweden are often related to drug dealings of gang members ⁽²⁷⁵⁾.

The drug-related shootings in Sweden are mostly **concentrated in the southern part of the country, more specifically in Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg** ⁽²⁷⁶⁾. In parallel, we find that there are considerably more locations with open street sales in the south of Sweden than in northern parts of the country ⁽²⁷⁷⁾. These findings further substantiate the statement that open drug markets are more prone to gun violence ⁽²⁷⁸⁾.

The increases in incidents of violence and homicides in Sweden are often linked to gangs whose primary source of income is drug trafficking. The **coming of age stories of these gangs** are telling illustrations of our findings throughout the current chapter, depicting young people living in vulnerable areas transitioning into crime, looking for status, power and fast money. 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 (teenage boys) hanging out together. Some of the boys carry weapons and several of them are already known to the police for vandalising police cars. They quickly graduate from petty criminals to committing more serious criminal offences. In 2015 following a robbery, conflict arises between the friends and one of them ends up shot to death in a wooded area. Only one day later a 16-year-old, but well-known, criminal is murdered at a petrol station in Bromma. Following these events, the group splits. The first group is called the 'Gang of Fours' and is soon nicknamed 'Death Squad' by the media. The other group

^(ix) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

calls themselves 'Shottaz' ⁽²⁷⁹⁾. The years that follow are marked by several violent incidents between the rival gangs. On 2 December 2016, two brothers, one of whom is linked to the core of the Shottaz gang, are murdered by two masked men wielding automatic weapons ⁽²⁸⁰⁾. Only 11 days later there is a shooting on Hidinge hill. Around 40 shots are fired between two cars. One of the Death Squad leaders gets injured during the shooting ⁽²⁸¹⁾. Another example is the attempt on the life of the brother of one of the murdered members of the Death Squad on 23 October 2017. Even though he was shot at several times, the man survived the shooting because he was wearing body armour ⁽²⁸²⁾. A fourth example is the killing of a young man in his twenties, who was linked to the Death Squad. The man was shot eight times and died at the scene. The murder took place in a parking garage widely known in the area for drug dealing ⁽²⁸³⁾. Another incident occurred on 7 January 2018. A 16-year-old boy shoots and kills a man believed to be part of the Shottaz while he was eating in a pizzeria ⁽²⁸⁴⁾. Together, the 20 identified members of both gangs (all between 17 and 24 years old in 2019) are convicted for a total of 330 crimes, which include drug offences, robbery, assault and murder ⁽²⁸⁵⁾. After being sentenced to life imprisonment for a double murder in Herlev (Denmark), the last of the four key leaders of the Death Squad is now behind bars. All leading figures of the Shottaz gang have been killed, imprisoned or left the country ⁽²⁸⁶⁾.

Nevertheless, drug-related gang warfare continues in Sweden, currently in the form of conflicts between Husby's Hyenas and the Shottaz Younger, a splinter group of the original Shottaz ⁽²⁸⁷⁾. In recent years, the **Husby's Hyenas** (or HH) have emerged in north-western Stockholm and fought for power over the western part of the city. As younger criminals, they would act as accomplices to leading criminals in all sorts of crimes such as drug trafficking, aggravated shoplifting, dealing of weapons and theft. Now, several years later, it appears that the HH has taken on a prominent, and particularly violent role in the West End's criminal milieu. They seemingly have ready access to weapons and do not hesitate to use them. The police suspect that they are responsible for the murders of members of the 'Shottaz' gang, a rival gang in Stockholm. The HH is headed by two young men, now aged 21 and 22. Both men already have an extensive criminal record encompassing several drugs and weapons offences. It is reported that their main source of income is drug sales. Following various police investigations into the life of the 22-year-old gang leader, several grams of cannabis resin and cocaine were seized, in addition to various types of ammunition, a loaded Zastava revolver and a loaded Tokarev-type gun, which was subsequently linked to at least three shootings, two attempted murders and an aggravated threat ⁽²⁸⁸⁾.

Chapter 4

The societal impact of drug-related gun violence

The impact of firearms trafficking and associated violence in the drug trade is not limited to damages within the criminal milieu. Often these shootings also impact the broader community and create spill-over effects affecting other parts of societal life.

Impact on the local community

The impact of drug-related firearms violence on the local community can be direct or indirect, taking on different forms, from a resident being threatened or extorted because of his job, through bystanders ending up as collateral damage, to trauma and feelings of insecurity and fear of crime.

Direct impact

The local community can be directly affected by drug-related shootings when residents or individuals working in the community are **threatened or extorted** ⁽²⁸⁹⁾. An example of this direct impact is the case from 2017 of an Antwerp dockworker whose house in Ekeren (Belgium) was shot at while his wife and son were upstairs sleeping. It is believed that this shooting is connected to retaliatory actions against an important figure in the drug milieu who employed several dockworkers in the port of Antwerp to extract shipments of cocaine from their containers ⁽²⁹⁰⁾. However, the dockworker always maintained his innocence in the matter, which was later corroborated by sources from within the drug milieu, stating the person in question was repeatedly approached for the job, but always declined the offer. In addition, the dockworker was never charged on suspicion of being involved in the matter ⁽²⁹¹⁾.

The aftermath of this incident also illustrates a second way in which the local community can be directly impacted. Drug criminals can also be **ill-informed about the target** of the violence, or a **case of mistaken identity** can affect persons who have nothing to do with the matter. Continuing the case of the threatened dockworker, the house in Ekeren was yet again subjected to a shooting five years after the first incident. However, the dockworker and his family had moved house shortly after the attack in May 2017. As a consequence, the family who was now living in the house were the victims of an attack for which they were not the intended target ⁽²⁹²⁾. Another example is a shooting in Willebroek (Belgium) in March 2022, when unknown individuals fired about 20 shots at a house. The intended target was, however, most probably the house of a neighbour who is known to have ties with the drug milieu. As the houses both look the same and carry the same house number, it is most likely that the shooters mistakenly shot at the wrong house ⁽²⁹³⁾.

Such mistakes can have far-reaching consequences. In January 2014 an innocent man who was walking his dog was shot at close range in Berkel en Rodenrijs (the Netherlands) and died from his wounds. It is believed that this was a case of mistaken identity. The intended target was a known drug criminal, who was involved in a criminal conflict about a drug bust in 2013, living in the same area. The perpetrators thought the victim was their target because he was coming from the direction of the drug criminal's house. The innocent victim was 44 years old and left a wife and two young children behind ⁽²⁹⁴⁾.

Interactions in the drug milieu also create **spill-over** effects, where violence does not stay contained to conflicts among criminals. On 6 July 2021, a Dutch crime reporter was shot in the street after leaving the studios of a television station. He died a week later in hospital. The police arrested two suspects who, at the time of their arrest, were in possession of a converted blank-firing pistol and a submachine gun. It is believed that the murder of the journalist is connected to his work, more specifically his involvement in the Marengo trial (see above) ⁽²⁹⁵⁾.

Recently, in September 2022, the Belgian minister of justice was placed under high security and he and his family were moved to a safe house after information was received that the minister was the target of a kidnapping, and the police noticed a suspicious car with Dutch number plates driving around in the minister's residential area. The driver and passengers were able to escape, but the next day the police were called for a car blocking the driveway of one of the minister's neighbours ⁽²⁹⁶⁾. During an inspection of the vehicle the police officers found an automatic firearm, two pistols and tension straps ⁽²⁹⁷⁾. The following day the police arrested three suspects with Dutch nationality and a fourth one two days later. The threat is believed to come from key players in the criminal drug milieu in the country. The minister had recently made some strides in tackling drug networks (cf. SkyECC) and signed a treaty with the United Arab Emirates that allows for drug criminals to be extradited to Belgium ⁽²⁹⁸⁾. It is believed that kidnapping the minister would have served to negotiate the release of prominent figures of the drug milieu from prison ⁽²⁹⁹⁾. In December 2022, the minister and his family were once again placed in a safe house following a new threat ⁽³⁰⁰⁾.

Finally, several innocent bystanders have also been killed or injured in drug-related violence that targeted other criminals. A very recent example is the death of an 11-year-old girl as a result of shots fired at the garage door of her home in Merksem (Belgium). The shooting seems to be related to the dealings of her uncle, who is suspected of large-scale cocaine trafficking and is currently residing in the United Arab Emirates ⁽³⁰¹⁾. In June 2015, a four-year-old girl and three adults died in a car explosion in Torslanda, Sweden. One of the passengers, a 32-year-old male was a known gang leader in Gothenburg and presumed to be the target of the attack ⁽³⁰²⁾. A year later in an apartment in Biskopsgården, an eight-year-old boy died in another explosion that may also be gang-related ⁽³⁰³⁾. In 2019, a woman carrying her nearly three-month-old baby was shot in the street and died. The woman, a doctor at Skåne University Hospital, was a witness in the murder trial of one of her patients. Her patient died following a shooting and she testified during the trial about the injuries he sustained. It is, however, not confirmed that her testimony and her murder are related and a widely reported theory in several media outlets is that the father of the child might actually have been the intended target ⁽³⁰⁴⁾.

Indirect impact

Crime and disorder that is not immediately directed against the neighbourhood residents nevertheless also leaves its mark. Often entire communities, families and children experience **social, emotional and physical trauma** from the pervasive culture of fear and violence that dominates these communities ⁽³⁰⁵⁾. The staff of the Mynta café in Rinkeby, for example, who were working during the shooting of the two brothers (in 2016 – see [Chapter 3](#)), were placed on sick leave following the incident ⁽³⁰⁶⁾.

These conflicts also have an impact on the public confidence in government institutions. When considering the judicial aspects of shootings, these types of crimes are not always easy to solve. In this regard, the Swedish police, for example, encounter many problems when trying to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice. In fact, their clearing rates have declined dramatically, from 95 % in the 1990s to only 50 % after 2010 ⁽³⁰⁷⁾. A local Swedish police officer stated that ‘the problems right now are so serious that we have trouble keeping up as we are having to prioritise so many serious crimes at the same time’ ⁽³⁰⁸⁾. This does not instil much **trust from the public in their policing and judicial system** ⁽³⁰⁹⁾. The decline in trust in government institutions was further reflected in the recent elections in Sweden. The gang violence in the country dominated the public debate. According to a study by the University of Gothenburg, criminality was the most important social and political issue in Sweden in 2022 and remained the number one problem for all the questioned groups of participants. This was a unique finding as the topic ‘crime’ had not topped the polls in any election year since regular polling began in 1979 ⁽³¹⁰⁾.

The **social costs** of firearms violence are also significant. Research found that the direct medical costs and indirect losses of productivity are higher for firearm-related injuries than for those inflicted by sharp instruments. These disproportionately higher costs for gun violence are attributed to the higher proportion of firearm-inflicted injuries resulting in death or injuries warranting hospitalisation ⁽³¹¹⁾.

The crime-terror nexus

The crime-terror nexus with regard to drugs and firearms can manifest itself in three ways: (1) the use of drugs before committing acts of terrorism, (2) the illicit trade in guns and drugs to finance terrorism, and (3) the use of drug-crime connections to acquire firearms for terrorist purposes. Ultimately only one of them seems to have real merit.

It is sometimes noted that terrorists often use **drugs that alter their state of mind** right before committing their acts. However plausible, there is not much evidence to be found to support this claim. No explicit, pronounced and automatic link can be found between drug use and the perpetration of a terrorist attack. The few exceptional cases reported in Europe do not stand up to scrutiny. For example, a 20-year-old man stabbed a police officer and two soldiers in Milan Central Station in May 2017. The perpetrator later declared that he had taken cocaine on the day of the attack and did not remember anything of the incident. He also stated that the attack was not motivated by jihadism ⁽³¹²⁾. A non-European case that took place in Tunisia seems to provide a clearer link and merits attention. After the firearms attack in a holiday resort in Sousse in June 2015 that killed 38 people, the autopsy of the perpetrator revealed that he had consumed a drug that causes a ‘feeling of exhaustion, aggression and extreme anger that leads to murders being committed. Another effect of these drugs is that they enhance physical and mental performance’. Even though the effects of the drug might have been a contributing factor, a neurobiologist specialised in addictions stated that taking Captagon alone is not enough to carry out such an attack and that the drug was acting on a ‘pre-formatted’ brain. In other words, that the shooter had made up his mind to commit the crime before taking the drug ⁽³¹³⁾. These types of incidents involving terrorists who commit their attacks under the influence of drugs seem to be more of an exception than the rule ⁽³¹⁴⁾.

In exceptional cases, the trafficking in both firearms and drugs is believed to **finance terrorist activities** in Europe. In 2022, a 54-year-old man from Vienna (Austria) was convicted for selling amphetamine, an Uzi submachinegun and a Kalashnikov-type rifle to an undercover police officer during a sting operation. The police suspect that he used the profits from dealing in firearms and drugs to support right-wing extremist militias in Germany ⁽³¹⁵⁾. In 2016, an international law enforcement operation, supported by Europol, the Joint Operations Teams 'Rose of the Winds' dismantled a transnational poly-criminal network involved in large-scale drug trafficking in the Mediterranean Sea, especially of cannabis resin. Interestingly, there was also 'convincing intelligence suggesting links to firearms trafficking'. According to Europol, 'the routes used, the financial flows and the nationalities of the perpetrators suggest that at least some of the huge revenues generated may be destined to finance the activities of terrorist groups or their associates' ⁽³¹⁶⁾.

Although criminal firearms dealers seem generally reluctant to sell to terrorists, there is an undeniable crime-terror nexus, as many jihadi terrorists have a criminal past, often having being involved in robberies or the drug trade. Making use of this **convergence of social networks and environments**, terrorists are able to acquire their firearms on the criminal gun market ⁽³¹⁷⁾. The perpetrator of the 2012 terrorist attacks in Toulouse and Montauban, for example, was a 'go-fast' driver for an OCG that operated between France and Spain, smuggling cocaine. The Uzi submachine gun the perpetrator used during the attack was acquired via a childhood friend, who was a small criminal who dealt in drugs, cars and other commodities. The .45 Colt pistol used by the perpetrator was part of two crates of firearms and ammunition that were stolen from a professional sports shooter in 2011. During the arrest of other Toulouse-based traffickers, several other weapons belonging to the same 2011 haul were retrieved ⁽³¹⁸⁾. In addition, the perpetrator of the Jewish museum attack in Brussels in 2014 acquired his firearms from a criminal connection. In this case, a Kalashnikov-type rifle and a revolver were acquired from a criminal from the Marseille area who the perpetrator had met in prison ⁽³¹⁹⁾. The supplier of these firearms was arrested eight months after the attack. During the house search, the police seized a Kalashnikov-type rifle, two pistols and a hunting rifle. Interestingly, the supplier explained that he was only guarding the firearms for another person who was in prison for drug trafficking at that time ⁽³²⁰⁾.

Conclusions and implications

This study demonstrates that a nexus exists between drug markets and gun violence in Europe. In various European countries, a higher availability of trafficked firearms on the illicit market has triggered drug-related gun violence. Many actors involved in drug-related gun violence are young adults using gun violence as a means to advance their criminal career. In some countries, the increased availability of firearms on the illicit market enables lower-level drug criminals to acquire firearms. An increased presence of guns among criminals also raises the need of guns for protection. These dynamics create a vicious cycle of firearms trafficking and gun violence.

Drug-related gun violence is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, which has a deep and lasting impact on society. A comprehensive and proactive approach is needed to combat firearms trafficking and prevent gun violence. A key element in such an approach is a good intelligence picture on these security phenomena. This requires more and better ballistics data, as well as law enforcement information and intelligence on firearms trafficking and criminal shootings. Such data and information are crucial to adequately inform evidence-based policy initiatives, support targeted law enforcement actions and evaluate policies. The present study contributes towards a better understanding of drug-related gun violence in the European Union and supports appropriate policy responses to prevent this type of violence.

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