

Factsheet

Firearms and deaths by firearms in the EU

In recent years, policy attention to firearm violence in the European Union (EU) has increased greatly. A thorough insight into the problem is an important step in developing such a policy. How many firearms are circulating in the EU? How many deaths are caused by firearms? Is there a relationship between gun ownership and the number of violent deaths (homicides and suicides)? And what is the impact of firearms legislation? The European Commission has already said that 'a lack of solid EU-wide statistics and intelligence hampers effective policy and operational responses'. The research of the Flemish Peace Institute offers a starting point to fill this need.

Nearly 80 million guns in the EU

There are currently at least **25 million gun owners** in the EU, mainly men. Together, they own approximately **79.8 million guns**. This means an average gun ownership rate of 15.7 guns per 100 people in the EU. Arms possession varies between Member States. Most firearms can be found in the larger countries (France, Germany), but other countries (e.g. Finland, Cyprus or Sweden) have higher gun ownership rates per capita. There is no clear trend in firearm possession in the EU: in some countries it has decreased in recent years, while in others it has increased.

With respect to these data it should be noted that these are estimates, and that a more systematic recording of firearm ownership in the EU is needed. A particular challenge is that of mapping illegal firearm possession.

Hunting is the most common reason why Europeans have a firearm, followed by professional reasons (e.g. police) and sports shooting. To a lesser extent, reasons for firearm possession are personal protection or collecting. Europeans mainly own rifles (e.g. hunting rifles) and to a lesser extent handguns, such as pistols and revolvers.

6,700 deaths by firearms in the EU each year

In the EU approximately 6,700 people die as a result of shot wounds each year. This number is composed of 5,000 suicides (75%), 1,000 homicides (15%) and 700 unspecified deaths or accidents. The available figures show a decreasing trend, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

The **5,000 suicides** by firearms per year represent 9% of all suicides in the EU. Especially older men commit suicide using a firearm. Earlier studies indicate that these suicides are usually committed with legal firearms.

On average, in the EU **1,000 homicides** are committed with firearms each year, but this number varies considerably from one Member State to another. Homicides with firearms represent 20% of all homicides in the EU, a percentage that is far below the worldwide average (40%). Little is known about the legal/illegal nature of arms used in homicides.

Men are more often victims of firearm homicides than women. Male victims are often young, whereas female victims are usually older. This may be related to the context in which the homicides take place: female victims are often victims of domestic violence at the hands of their (ex-)partners, whereas men become victims in more diverse contexts, such as crime, street violence, etc.

The relationship between firearm possession and deaths by firearms

There is a relationship between firearm possession and the number of deaths by firearms. **In countries with more firearms, there are usually more deaths by firearms.** This relationship is strongest in the case of suicides committed with a firearm, and less pronounced in the case of firearm homicides of women.

It is sometimes argued that, when no firearm is available, another instrument will be used for the suicide or the homicide ('substitution'). This would mean that in countries where firearm possession rates are lower, there are more homicides and suicides using instruments other than firearms. However, this turns out not to be the case.

Taking into consideration all figures, no relationship can be established between the number of firearms and the total number of homicides and suicides: **where there are more firearms, the total number of homicides and suicides is not consistently higher or lower**, and vice versa. This is not surprising: 1) the numbers of homicides and suicides committed using a firearm only represent a part of the total number of homicides and suicides (20% and 9%, respectively), which renders a possible statistical effect on the total number of violent deaths difficult to detect within the larger picture; and 2) a lot of factors have an influence on the extent to which homicides and suicides take place in a country: the economic situation, mental healthcare, the law enforcement, government campaigns, gun laws, etc.

The role of arms legislation and policy

A large proportion of all suicides are impulsive acts. Furthermore, a considerable share of homicides occur as a result of 'expressive violence', concretely in a domestic context. Research has shown that a firearm is often used in this type of suicides and homicides.

These findings provide a basis for policy measures. To prevent **impulsive suicides and homicides linked to domestic violence**, limiting the availability of firearms can make a difference.

Therefore, the purpose of arms legislation and other (European) policy measures must be to limit the possession of firearms to those capable of using them in a responsible way and keeping them in a careful and safe manner. Relevant measures include, for instance, the introduction of a legitimate reason for the possession of arms, background checks and safe storage rules. Restrictions on the possibility of taking home firearms that are used in a professional context can also play a significant role.

The impact of such measures is only to a certain extent affected by 'substitution' (substituting the firearm for another instrument). The available research shows that in European countries where such policy initiatives have been taken, the total number of suicides and homicides has dropped. Reducing the availability of firearms can give people time to think twice in case of impulsive acts or receive help. Firearms are also very deadly instruments. When one does continue with the impulsive suicide or homicide attempt, other instruments (medication, strangling, stabbing weapons, etc.) often have less lethal outcomes.

Want to learn more?

The full report '*Firearms and Violent Deaths in Europe*', which contains all data and analyses used, can be found on www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu.