

Theft of firearms in the EU

Project SAFTE generated new insights into illicit firearms markets in Europe and terrorist access to those markets. One of the main findings of the project was the fragmented nature of illicit firearms markets. There is no such thing as a single illicit firearms market in the EU; rather there are many illicit firearms markets, each with different characteristics and dynamics. Criminal and terrorist actors source their firearms through a variety of supply mechanisms. Because of the varying local dynamics, a supply mechanism may be predominant in one member state, but not in another. This fact sheet discusses firearms theft as one of the main supply mechanisms for illicit firearms markets in the EU.

Theft as a source for EU illicit firearms markets

Theft is considered a primary source for illegal procurement of firearms in several EU member states. The majority of thefts occur in the private homes of gun owners, but firearms thefts have also been observed from facilities connected to the legal firearms market (e.g. gun stores, shooting ranges and production sites) or government stockpiles (armed forces, law enforcement agencies and weapons destruction sites).

Information on the number of stolen firearms is not always publicly available. The table on the following page gives an overview of the collected data on the **number of stolen firearms** in the SAFTE country studies. Significant differences can be observed: while in the Netherlands only about 300 firearms and in the UK fewer than 700 firearms are stolen annually, this number exceeds 10,000 in France.

This difference can partially be attributed to the differences in population size between these countries, but also to differences in the level of (generally legal) firearms possession: while 16% of households in France are believed to own a firearm, this figure is only 6% in the UK and 5% in the Netherlands. Given the differences in legal gun ownership of different types of firearms across the EU, it is believed that also the types of firearms stolen in these countries can differ significantly. However, detailed information on the types of firearms stolen is often unavailable.

Existing gun theft statistics need to be interpreted with caution, given that **some recorded thefts are in reality cases of embezzlement**, whereby legal gun owners officially declare firearms stolen in order to keep them illegally.

This type of embezzlement is believed to be especially popular after the adoption of new regulations aimed at restricting legal access to certain types of firearms.

Number of stolen firearms and sites of thefts in the SAFTE country studies

Country (year)	Total number of stolen firearms	Sites of theft
Belgium (2015)	More than 827	Legal gun owners, manufacturers, arms dealers, state stockpiles, destruction sites
Croatia	Unknown	State stockpiles
Denmark (2012-2016)	More than 1,000 from private homes	Legal gun owners, shooting clubs, civilian militias
France (2015)	10,572	Legal gun owners, arms dealers, arms fairs
Italy	Unknown	Legal gun owners, manufacturers, arms dealers, state stockpiles, private security guards
The Netherlands (2014)	300	Legal gun owners, arms dealers, shooting clubs
Romania	Unknown	Legal gun owners, state stockpiles
UK (2015-2016)	692	Legal gun owners, state stockpiles

Organised thefts

The nature of firearm thefts differs significantly depending on the location:

- Thefts from private homes are generally random and involve small quantities of weapons stolen at one specific time by thieves who are not necessarily looking for firearms, but for valuable goods in general.
- Thefts from other locations – especially gun stores and government stockpiles – are generally more organised operations targeting large quantities or specific types of firearms.

Firearms collectors, who often own large quantities of sometimes very sophisticated and expensive firearms, can also be the targets of more organised thefts. Given that they are sometimes allowed to possess military-grade firearms, security guards or civilian militias have also been the victim of targeted thefts.

Terrorist firearms acquisition through theft

Targeted thefts can also be executed by terrorists planning to launch an attack with the stolen firearms. From a historical perspective, these thefts have been a vital element of the firearms acquisition patterns of separatist terror groups in Europe, such as the Basque separatist movement ETA.

In recent years, targeted thefts by terrorists seem to have decreased. Firearms that were the object of such thefts have only occasionally been encountered among jihadi networks. An important exception is the M95 rifle used in the attack on the Krudttønden Café in Copenhagen in 2015. This rifle was stolen during a planned robbery from a member of the Danish Home Guard, a volunteer military organisation that supports the military and police, in which the terrorist specifically targeted the residence of the Home Guard member.