

## Factsheet

# Illegal firearms in Belgium

## How many illegal firearms are there in Belgium?

The term “illegal arms” does not say much about the nature of the arms. Whether an arm is legal or illegal mainly depends on who owns, sells or uses it. While most people are prohibited from owning or using automatic firearms, they are not illegal *per se*: the armed forces and the police may use them, traders may procure these arms for them and arms collectors can own them.

It is impossible to say how many illegal arms there are in circulation in Belgium. Aside from the fact that illegal items are by definition also clandestine, there are currently not enough reliable data to make an accurate estimate.

The following figures are available:

- In the years between 2009 and 2013 the Belgian federal police registered 25,000 cases of illegal firearms possession. This amounts to 5,700 cases on average per year. Note, however, that these are just the number of cases registered: the total number of confiscated firearms will be higher.
- Every year the police on average registers 150 to 200 charges of illegal arms trafficking.
- From 2009 until 2013, 82,154 “arms”-related cases were brought before the courts. The number of cases increased by 25% over this period.

## Who owns illegal firearms in Belgium?

It is important to distinguish between three groups who own illegal firearms:

### 1. Criminals

Criminals play an important role in the European market for illegal firearms. Drug-related crime, armed robbers, street gangs and motorcycle gangs all have their own gun acquisition dynamics. Good connections and trust are vital in this framework.

### 2. Terrorist groups

Terrorist groups can use firearms for attacks. They generally procure their arms through contacts with the world of organized crime, but also sometimes work with their own supply channels.

### 3. Private individuals

Private individuals also own illegal firearms. In most cases they did not buy them on the criminal market, but their arms became illegal as a result of changes in legislation and they never regularized them. Most often, these private individuals do not have criminal intentions. They want to keep these arms as protection; because they are part of a collection; or for emotional reasons (e.g. an inherited arm). Leakage to criminal circles can, however, occur from this group.

## How does one obtain an illegal firearm?

### **Cross-border smuggling**

An important source for illegal firearms in Europe is cross-border smuggling. European integration, creating the Schengen area, has facilitated these smuggling practices: as soon as a firearm enters the EU it can easily circulate. The major source countries for illegal arms trafficking are in the Balkan region. Usually the arms are smuggled to order, in small batches; are hidden in cars; or travel in the luggage compartments of coaches.

### **Theft**

A relatively high number of firearms are stolen in Belgium: every year the federal police files reports on 1,600 to 2,100 thefts. Arms are mainly stolen from private individuals. In some cases, however, they are also stolen from the arsenals of the police or the armed forces, from arms manufacturers, shooting ranges, and arms traders.

### **Fraud**

Sometimes a paper trail is created to conceal the fact that legal arms have been diverted to illegal channels. This is done for example by inventing exports, by falsifying the registers of arms traders, or by reporting fictional thefts.

### **Illegal production and conversion of arms**

Some people assemble their own guns using weapon components. The re-activation of neutralized arms and the conversion of alarm and gas pistols into operational firearms is also a concern. Finally, 3D printing is also a challenge for the future.

### **Non-regularization after amendments to the arms act**

When the owners of arms do not follow the new rules on possession of arms after an amendment to the Firearms Act, their arms become illegal. After the Belgian Firearms Act was tightened up in 2006, it is likely that tens of thousands of arms became illegal in Belgium.

## Is Belgium a hub for illegal arms?

Belgium is a special country in terms of firearms. Compared with the Netherlands, for example, the scale of legal possession of firearms in Belgium is quite substantial. For centuries the country has been a major producer of firearms, and it is also one of the leading firearms exporters worldwide.

In terms of illegal arms, however, the dynamics are not exclusively Belgian. Illegal arms trafficking is a European problem. There is a black market for firearms in all European capitals. The presence of serious crime means there are also illegal arms circulating. Belgium is an important player in this European framework because of its geographical location and history. Consequently it can play a significant role in the fight against illegal arms trafficking.

### **More information?**

All published research on firearms conducted by the Flemish Peace Institute can be found on <http://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/research/arms-trade-arms-production-programme/firearms>