

# Public mass shootings in Europe: how did the weapons fall into the wrong hands?

*In Europe, there were 23 public mass shootings between 2009 and 2018. They claimed the lives of a total of 341 people. That means an average of 2.3 mass shootings with a total of 34 casualties per year. Those shootings took place in 15 different European countries, including Belgium, with mass shootings at the Christmas market in Liège in December 2011 and the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014. In its report "Armed to Kill"<sup>1</sup>, the Flemish Peace Institute investigated which types of firearms were used in the 23 identified mass shootings in Europe and how the perpetrators obtained those firearms.*

## Diversity of mass shootings

Public mass shootings have an impact on society, and in Europe they often lead to changes in arms legislation or policy to combat illicit arms trafficking. Research on such shootings in Europe and particularly the firearms used is fairly limited, however. Our study has shown that such mass shootings are usually carried out by an **individual (male) perpetrator** and that they take place at **different locations**, such as shopping centres, restaurants, businesses, or schools. However, the perpetrators of such shootings **do not always have the same motives**. Certain shootings are clearly inspired by terrorist motives, prompting the perpetrators to claim as many casualties as possible, or are directed at symbolic targets. Examples include the two terrorist mass shootings in Paris in 2015 at the editorial office of

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Definition

The literature offers **no generally accepted definition** of a "public mass shooting". This study uses the following definition: "*Homicide in the (semi-)public sphere where at least four people - not including the perpetrator(s) - have been killed in a relatively short time and within a fairly limited geographical area by one or several perpetrators using a firearm.*"

### Data collection

**23 mass shootings were identified** based on this definition. For each of those incidents, **as much relevant information as possible was collected** about the firearms used and the way in which the perpetrators obtained those firearms. For this purpose, **public sources** were primarily used, such as official government reports and press articles.

the Charlie Hebdo weekly and at the Bataclan concert hall, as well as the mass shooting on Utøya island in Norway, where the perpetrator deliberately targeted the participants at a summer camp of a political party. In all terrorist mass shootings between 2009 and 2018 that were investigated, a total of 236 people were killed by bullets. Most of the mass shootings in Europe, however, are not inspired by terrorist motives. The perpetrators are individuals holding a particular grudge. Sometimes the incidents involve family members or other acquaintances and events spiral out of control; often, though, the victims are unknown to the perpetrator.

**Table 1: Survey of public mass shootings in Europe, 2009-2018**

Date	Place	Number of deaths (excluding perpetrators)
March 2009	Winnenden (Germany)	15
December 2009	Espoo (Finland)	4
June 2010	Cumbria (United Kingdom)	12
August 2010	Devínska Nová Ves (Slovakia)	7
September 2011	Alphen aan de Rijn (Netherlands)	6
July 2011	Utøya (Norway)	67
December 2011	Liège (Belgium)	6
March 2012	Toulouse-Montauban (France)	4
April 2012	Smilkovci (Macedonia)	5
September 2012	Chevaline (France)	4
February 2013	Menzau (Switzerland)	4
April 2013	Velika Ivanča (Serbia)	13
September 2013	Annaberg (Austria)	4
May 2014	Brussels (Belgium)	4
November 2014	Tirana (Albania)	4
January 2015	Paris (France)	17
February 2015	Uherský Brod (Czech Republic)	8
May 2015	Naples (Italy)	4
August 2015	Roye (France)	4
November 2015	Paris (France)	Around 130
July 2016	Žitište (Serbia)	5
July 2016	Munich (Germany)	9
December 2018	Strasbourg (France)	5

Most of the perpetrators of mass shootings in Europe carried one or two firearms. In total, they used **at least 49 different firearms**, of which we were able to identify 45. These include a **wide range** of firearm types, makes and models. The most commonly used types of firearms were pistols (18) and rifles (19). Revolvers (5), submachine guns (1) and shotguns (2) were used considerably less in the shootings. The rifles were both fully automatic and semi-automatic types. It is worth noting that fully automatic rifles were primarily used in terrorist-inspired shootings, whereas semi-automatic weapons were mainly used in shootings without terrorist motives.

## Acquisition of the firearms used in non-terrorist shootings

In recent years, public mass shootings in Europe not inspired by terrorist motives were always carried out by lone perpetrators. **The gunman usually used just one firearm.** Mass shootings in which the perpetrator used several firearms were less frequent. For the purposes of our study, we were able to identify 22 of the 23 firearms that were used in those shootings. We found that the gunmen **mostly used handguns** (59%), mainly pistols (especially 9mm calibre) and revolvers. Rifles were regularly used as well (39%), mainly **semi-automatic rifles**.

Our analysis showed that **in nearly half the cases the gunman had acquired his weapon legally** with a firearms licence or similar authorization. In several cases, the weapon had been in the gunman's possession for a long time. The perpetrator of the shooting in the Serbian village of Velika Ivanča in 2013, for instance, had owned his pistol for more than 30 years with a firearms licence. In other cases, the gunman bought his weapons relatively soon before the shooting, although – unlike in the terrorist-inspired shootings – we had no indications that the perpetrators had obtained their firearms specifically with intent to commit acts of lethal violence. It is worth noting that several perpetrators who lawfully possessed their firearms suffered from (frequently long-term) **mental health problems**, but those problems were not identified, or identified too late, by the relevant authorities. The family of the perpetrator of the shooting in Uherský Brod in the Czech Republic in 2015 had contacted the police to warn them of his mental health problems, but the gunman carried out the shooting before he had to undergo a new compulsory medical test.

**In the other half of cases, the perpetrators used an illicitly acquired firearm.** It is not always known how exactly they came by those weapons, but usually we were able to pinpoint the moment when they were diverted from the legal market. The perpetrators of two mass shootings had **obtained** their weapons **from a family member** who lawfully possessed it. The perpetrator of the shooting at a factory in Meznau, Switzerland, in 2013 used a firearm which his brother had lawfully acquired, but then illicitly passed on to the perpetrator. The gunman responsible for a shooting at his school in Winnenden, Germany, in 2009 used a weapon which his father – who was a competition shooter – had failed to lock away safely. In two other cases, the gunmen used firearms that had been previously **stolen from strangers**, such as from a gun shop. It is unclear, however, whether the gunmen had stolen the weapons themselves or obtained the stolen weapons on the illegal market. It is also worth noting that in two shooting incidents weapons were used containing parts that originated from **military stocks**. Here, too, it is unclear whether the gunmen assembled those weapons themselves or obtained the weapons ready-made on the illegal market.

**Fully automatic rifles** were used in only two non-terrorist mass shootings (at the Christmas market in Liège in 2011 and in the Serbian town of Žitište in 2016). Those weapons had been illicitly obtained by the perpetrators, which is not surprising since such weapons are classified as 'prohibited weapons', making it fairly unlikely that individuals would lawfully possess them. It is probably no coincidence that the perpetrator of the shooting incident in Liège was a criminal, known to be involved in drugs and arms trafficking, while the shooting

in Žitište took place in a country where to this day large quantities of weapons of war are still on the illicit market as a result of the wars in former Yugoslavia.

**Table 2: Survey of firearm types and manner of their acquisition, used in non-terrorist public mass shootings in Europe, 2009-2018**

Shooting incident	Type(s) of firearm(s) used	Acquisition
Winnenden (2009)	Beretta 92 pistol (9 mm)	Diverted from lawful owner
Espoo (2009)	CZ 75 pistol (9 mm)	Illicitly acquired (stolen from lawful owner)
Cumbria (2010)	Shotgun (12 gauge)	Lawfully acquired (shotgun certificate) ; barrel illicitly sawn off
	CZ 452-2E repeating rifle (.22)	Lawfully acquired (licence)
Devinska Nová Ves (2010)	Vz.58 semi-automatic rifle (7.62)	Lawfully acquired (competition shooting)
	CZ 85 pistol (9 mm)	Lawfully acquired (competition shooting)
	CZ 52 pistol (7.62)	Lawfully acquired (competition shooting)
Alphen aan de Rijn (2011)	Smith & Wesson M&P15-22 semi-automatic rifle	Lawfully acquired (competition shooting)
	Colt .45 pistol	Lawfully acquired (competition shooting)
	Taurus 66 revolver (.367)	Lawfully acquired (competition shooting)
Liège ( 2011)	FN FAL automatic rifle (7.62)	Illicitly acquired (components diverted from the Israeli Defence Forces)
	Smith & Wesson revolver (.41 Magnum)	Illicitly acquired (stolen from lawful arms dealer)
Menznau (2013)	Sphinx AT 380 pistol (.380)	Given by lawful owner
Velika Ivanča (2013)	CZ 88 pistol (9 mm)	Lawfully acquired (licence)
Annaberg (2013)	STG-77 semi-automatic rifle (5.56)	Illicitly acquired (components diverted from military base)
	Glock 17 pistol (9 mm)	Unclear
	Mauser shotgun	Unclear
Tirana (2014)	54 type pistol (7.62)	Illicitly acquired
Uherský Brod (2015)	CZ 75B pistol (9 mm)	Lawfully acquired (licence)
	Alfa 820 revolver (.38 Special)	Lawfully acquired (licence)
Roye ( 2015)	Beretta shotgun (12 calibre)	Unclear
Žitište (2016)	Kalashnikov type automatic rifle (7.62)	Illicitly acquired

## Acquisition of the firearms used in terrorist shootings

A salient feature of terrorist mass shootings is the **high average death toll**: the eight identified terrorist mass shootings claimed the lives of a total of approximately 236 people, or an average of around **30 casualties per shooting incident**. This high average is a direct result of the extremely deadly shootings in Paris in November 2015 (around 130 deaths), in Utøya in 2011 (67 deaths) and in Paris in January 2015 (17 deaths). It is important to point out that the two mass shootings in Paris in 2015 were carried out by several groups of gunmen.

The perpetrators used **at least 22 firearms** in the terrorist shootings. In virtually all cases, the perpetrators of these shooting incidents were armed with one or two firearms: a handgun, an automatic rifle, or a combination of the two types.

The manner of acquisition of the weapons shows a totally different pattern from that in the non-terrorist shootings. A striking feature is the large number of **weapons of war**, primarily Kalashnikov type automatic rifles. Also worth noting is the fact that the perpetrator of the

shooting in Utøya had also attempted – albeit unsuccessfully – to acquire such a weapon. This observation suggests that terrorists have a clear preference for that kind of weapon to carry out attacks. In Europe, the possibilities for gaining lawful access to such weapons are limited, and also involve a check of the criminal records of individuals applying for a firearms licence. Consequently, the lawful acquisition of firearms is usually not an option for individuals wishing to carry out a terrorist attack.

Earlier research has shown that terrorists in Europe mainly acquire their firearms on the illegal market through their criminal connections. On those markets, where mainly handguns can be obtained, having good connections and a reliable reputation is traditionally very important. Consequently, access to weapons of war has long been the prerogative of hardened criminals. **The closed nature of illegal arms markets in Europe has in recent years come increasingly under pressure** from the continuous smuggling of firearms out of the Balkan countries, the ready availability of converted alarm pistols and reactivated firearms, and the arrival of the Internet. This has also made it easier for minor criminals in several European countries to obtain firearms.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 3: Survey of firearm types and manner of their acquisition, used in terrorist public mass shootings in Europe, 2009-2018**

Shooting incident	Type(s) of firearm(s) used	Acquisition
<b>Jihad-inspired shooting</b>		
Toulouse (2012)	Colt .45 pistol Uzi submachine gun	Illicitly acquired on the criminal market (previously stolen from a competition shooter) Illicitly acquired from an old criminal contact
Brussels (2014)	Reactivated Llama revolver (.38 Special) Zastava M70 AB automatic rifle (7.62)	Illicitly acquired from a criminal contact (previously sold lawfully as a deactivated weapon) Illicitly acquired from a criminal contact
Paris (January 2015)	Two Zastava M70 AB2 automatic rifles (7.62) Two Zastava M57 pistols (7.62) Two reactivated Tokarev TT33 pistols (7.62) Two reactivated Vz.58 automatic rifles (7.62)	Illicitly acquired (diverted during wars in former Yugoslavia) Illicitly acquired (diverted during wars in former Yugoslavia) Illicitly acquired from a criminal contact (previously sold lawfully as deactivated weapons) Illicitly acquired from a criminal contact (previously sold lawfully as deactivated weapons)
Paris (November 2015)	Three Zastava M70 AB2 automatic rifles (7.62) Zastava M70 automatic rifle (7.62) AKS47 automatic rifle (7.62) Norinco 56-1 automatic rifle (7.62)	Illicitly acquired (diverted during wars in former Yugoslavia) Illicitly acquired (diverted during wars in former Yugoslavia) Illicitly acquired (diverted during wars in former Yugoslavia) Illicitly acquired (diverted during wars in former Yugoslavia)
Strasbourg (2018)	Lebel 1892 revolver (8 mm)	Illicitly acquired from a criminal contact
<b>Extreme right inspired shooting</b>		
Utøya (2011)	Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle (5.56) Glock 34 pistol (9 mm)	Lawfully acquired (hunting) Lawfully acquired (competition shooting)
Munich (2015)	Glock 17 pistol (9 mm)	Illicitly acquired on the dark web (converted Flobert weapon)

What emerges from our analyses is that the perpetrators of terrorist mass shootings in Europe obtained their firearms – including weapons of war – primarily through their **connections in the criminal underworld of drug trafficking and armed robbery**. In recent years, several criminals have been convicted of illegally supplying firearms or related items

to the perpetrators of those shootings. Some of those individuals knew the terrorists from their time in prison together, had known each other since childhood, or shared a criminal past. However, this does not alter the fact that **several perpetrators appear to have had no access to automatic rifles and other weapons of war**, and were obliged to use less suitable weapons. The gunman responsible for the shooting in the streets of Strasbourg used a type of revolver that was used as a service weapon by the French army in the First World War.

The two mass shootings inspired by extreme-right motives show that **not all perpetrators make use of criminal connections**. The gunman involved in the Utøya shooting had tried to do so, but was unsuccessful. For that reason he decided to acquire his pistol and semi-automatic rifle lawfully through the channel of competition shooting and hunting. The perpetrator of the shooting in Munich in 2016 also lacked the necessary connections in criminal circles, and obtained his pistol on the dark web. For those gunmen, the **Internet and the legal arms market** were more suitable channels to obtain their firearms.

## Policy recommendations

An important conclusion from our study is that the perpetrators of public mass shootings in Europe use **firearms already in their possession** (often individuals not inspired by terrorist motives) **or firearms they have easy access to** (often individuals inspired by terrorist motives). An attempt to tighten arms legislation is often the first action taken in the aftermath of a mass shooting in Europe. However, firearms are **durable goods with a generally long life cycle**. The large majority of illegal firearms disappear at a certain moment from the legal market and end up in the illegal market. Our analysis confirms that this **diversion from the legal market** can happen in **different ways**. The fully automatic rifles that were used in terrorist shootings often vanished from the radar in the 1990s during the wars in former Yugoslavia. Other weapons or their components were stolen from lawful firearms sources, such as private owners, gun shops or military stocks. Also worth noting is the use of reactivated firearms that had previously been sold legally in countries such as Slovakia and Spain, and the use of a converted 'Flobert' weapon. The latter examples show the **importance of the efficient regulation of private firearms ownership** in our European societies to prevent lawfully traded weapons from falling into the wrong hands.

Nevertheless, the observation that the perpetrators of such shooting incidents have used both legal and illegal firearms implies that policy must be focused on tightening the rules governing legal firearm ownership and the legal arms trade as well as **combating illicit arms trafficking**. In this respect, it is very important to abandon *event-driven policy* in favour of a structural, comprehensive and proactive strategy. Such a strategy should not only devote attention to the legal framework, but should also **invest in the operational capacities** of the agencies that are actively involved on a daily basis in the fight against illicit arms trafficking. Efforts should also be made to improve **collaboration** between the relevant agencies at the national and international level, including in present and potential source countries of illegal weapons.

Finally, we must stress the importance of **getting a better picture of illicit arms trafficking and armed violence** in our societies. This is an essential precondition for the development and implementation of a structural, comprehensive and proactive strategy aimed at combating these phenomena. In this study we focused on a specific form of armed violence. We hope that in this way we have been able to contribute to a better understanding of the issue. Nevertheless, further research into different forms of armed violence in Europe is needed. Although the risk of armed violence can never be ruled out entirely, it is important to chart this phenomenon as accurately as possible in order to take preventive action.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Duquet, N. et al (2019), Armed to Kill: A comprehensive analysis of the guns used in public mass shootings in Europe between 2009 and 2018, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.
- <sup>ii</sup> Duquet, N. & Goris, K. (2018), Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe: Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.

### Colophon

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