

EUROPOL SPOTLIGHT

**THE USE OF  
VIOLENCE BY  
ORGANISED  
CRIME GROUPS**

The use of violence by organised crime groups is a growing concern in the European Union (EU)<sup>1</sup>. The cases contributed to Europol suggest there has been a rise in the number of violent incidents associated with serious and organised crime over the last few years, as well as an increase in the impact and visibility they have had (a recent example is the discovery in July 2020 of a number of shipping containers in the Netherlands which had been converted into torture chambers). Recent cases in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Spain, as well as gang wars in Sweden (among others) have also pointed to an increasing willingness by organised crime groups to employ deadly violence in pursuit of their criminal objectives.

## One of the most worrying aspects of the violence witnessed across the EU is the risk to the general public.

Compounding factors to this state of affairs include the involvement of younger and inexperienced assassins, accessibility of firearms and explosives, and the fact that shootings and bombings are often perpetrated in crowded places and in broad daylight.

The violence seen in the EU is often linked to important transit points and is spilling out of major transportation hubs and onto the streets of surrounding cities, where competition for distribution takes place. Large ports are particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation by organised crime groups as there is a reduced probability of smuggled goods being detected due to the sheer volume of processed traffic. International organised crime groups have established footholds in and around these ports. Despite their transnational character, organised crime groups are able to use domestic influence to ensure support on the ground: this includes the corruption and intimidation of workers who are critical to the unloading and storage activities in port terminals.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistical information on fatal and serious violence committed by organised crime groups is not fully available at national and EU level. In most Member States, this information remains at the intelligence level in the context of the individual investigations themselves. Furthermore, statistics on violent incidents which are linked to organised crime groups are not recorded in a systematic way across the EU. In addition to the lack of statistics, the identification of a violent event linked to organised crime is challenging. Many violent events are not recorded because they are underreported, as the victims often refuse to file a complaint or assist the police in the circumstances of their assaults.

While violence and organised crime have long been considered natural allies, it is worth differentiating between organised criminal activities in which violence is intrinsic, and those in which violence acts as an auxiliary but is not indispensable to the activities per se. Examples of intrinsically violent criminal activities include aggravated robbery and kidnappings. In contrast, violence is often present but not necessarily integral to the trade in illicit commodities.

Violence in illicit markets is often a sign of growing competition (e.g. over the control of lucrative distribution networks or a particular geographic territory). This partly explains why most drug-related fatal and serious violence is reported in cocaine and cannabis markets – which have recently attracted new players – with fewer cases reported in the trafficking of heroin and synthetic drugs. Shifting power balances within or between competing organised crime groups, the impact of law enforcement efforts, or broader economic pressures can also generate violence.

Organised crime groups rely on violence – or the threat thereof – to strengthen their reputation, maintain their market position (e.g. to protect routes and other strategic assets associated with their trafficking activities) or to extend their market share. Violence is also used to safeguard internal order and to settle conflicts. Additionally, violence can be used by the organisation as a whole as well as by individuals within groups who aim to expand their own personal criminal reputation.

However, it is worth highlighting that while organised crime groups recognise the expedient value of force, they have historically tended to resort to violence only when other forms of intimidation prove inadequate. This is because violence attracts the attention of law enforcement agencies, which is often incompatible with the profit-driven motives of those involved in organised crime. Unlike terrorists who seek to confront the state and rely on symbolic acts of violence to do so, organised crime groups prefer to operate covertly to maximise profits while keeping the state at arm's length. In some instances however, transnational organised crime groups appear to be using violence despite the ensuing attention from law enforcement in order to strengthen their reputation in the criminal environment. Weakening public confidence in the repressive state apparatus and intimidating non-cooperative elements might be an additional motivation for violent behaviour. This is especially the case with murders carried out against non-criminals

and is particularly relevant to the escalating violence perpetrated against attorneys and investigative journalists in the EU. One infamous example is that of the murder of Dutch lawyer Derk Wiersum in 2019 outside his home in Amsterdam. Mr Wiersum was defending a gang member who turned state witness in a case against members of a violent drug gang.

## Indeed, serious violence does not exclusively affect criminals.

It can target non-criminals, members of the same group or members of outside groups.

### Extra-group

Victims of violent crimes may be victims of trafficking in human beings, violent robberies, kidnappings for ransom or smuggled migrants.

Other victims are those who engage in tackling criminal activities (e.g. law enforcement officers, border guards, tax officers, judicial officers, prosecutors, lawyers, witnesses and informants, court interpreters, investigative journalists, or uncooperative dock workers). The purpose of these attacks is to hamper their activities or to intimidate them.

### Intra-group

Within a given group, violence is widely used to maintain authority, discipline and cohesion. Members of the same organised crime group are targeted as a result of being disloyal, negligent, ceasing activities or doing business on their own without approval. Internal violence may target members at all levels – from lower ranking members and associates (e.g. drug couriers, strawmen,

money mules, or other facilitators) to the most senior members as a result of the loss of a commodity or an internal struggle. In these instances, violence is also used to set an example to others and as a form of intimidation.

### Inter-group

Externally, violence is primarily used to assert dominance over other organised crime groups, for the settling of scores, or in the context of debt recovery. Violence may be triggered by many factors such as commodity losses, turf wars, retaliation, drug robberies and rip deals. Violence may also be used to show dissatisfaction with the quality of an illicit commodity or a criminal service, or simply as a favour or service to a criminal associate. Fatal violent clashes occur at all levels of the criminal sphere, from street gangs and local criminals competing for dealing territories to top-level organised crime groups with far greater reach. Violence ranges from intimidation and threats to kidnappings, mutilations and assassinations.

Violence is also used as a form of revenge, for example as retaliation for murder or an attack on an associate or family member. It can also occur in the context of feuds, i.e. a prolonged mutual hostility between at least two organised crime groups, typically families or clans, characterised by violent assaults in revenge for previous injuries. As a deliberate strategy, some organised crime groups target not only their criminal rivals, but also their families and relatives (including minors) who are not engaged in any criminal activity. These attacks aim to demoralise competing groups, showing them that no one associated with them is safe.

Within this context, it is worth noting that violence is increasingly being marketed as a commodity by certain organised crime groups. While murders are often executed by organised crime group members themselves, the violence can also be outsourced. Contract killings are primarily executed in return for cash. While figures reported to Europol vary between €10 000 and €100 000, some Member States have noted that a hit currently costs much less than it did in the past, as a larger number of inexperienced and younger criminals are willing and available to carry out this type of crime.

The business model that underpins modern criminal economies thrives upon diversification and, as a result, generates volatile trading relationships. In particular, brokers (intermediaries between different sub-groups) are central to organised crime networks as they afford a greater degree of flexibility. This in turn exacerbates distrust amongst the increasingly service-oriented participants. Even long-standing relationships and family ties do not preclude one from becoming a target.

## **The impact of violence associated with organised crime is corrosive and affects countless sectors of society.**

In the near future, organised crime is likely to increase its global reach, become more fluid and digitalised, and as such, more open to diversity and competition. As a result, organised crime group-related violence is not expected to decrease in the short term. Furthermore, current violence is likely to act as a breeding ground for retaliatory action and revenge.

Against this backdrop of an increasingly globalised and fluid organised crime scene, law enforcement agencies should further engage in proactively anticipating trends and shifts in criminal markets and network structures. The current reality requires a change of outlook, moving away from a one-way focus on dismantling the group and confiscating its assets, to embracing a step-by-step comprehensive approach which would include detection and deterrence (including by attacking criminal finances at an earlier stage). This also entails focusing on the processes and resources by which crimes are committed in order to identify choke points for intervention.

## Law enforcement challenges

Members of organised crime groups apply techniques, tactics and procedures to ensure backstopping and lead investigations to dead-end (known as counter measures in the law enforcement community)



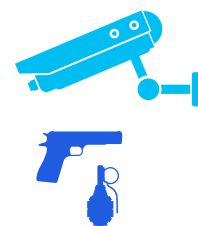
In some feuds, homicides or attempted homicides happen in different countries which enhances the complexity of investigation efforts



In a reactive investigation of a homicide, the link to the motive and the underlying criminal activity is not always apparent



Increased mobility of members, local support networks and availability of means to perpetrate the attack (firearms/explosives, surveillance equipment for target reconnaissance, etc.) complicate reactive investigations



A homicide seen as an isolated event has no clear cross-border/international dimension; countries do not consistently share information with international partners and Europol;



Hired assassins often remain under the radar as they are not a part of the organised crime group.



Given the scale of the threat posed by organised crime, the development of strategies and tools to neutralise it (especially in its transnational dimension) and the promotion of cooperation at regional and international levels, should continue to constitute a priority for Member States. **Europol recognises the use of violence as one of the risk indicators that define the profile of high-value targets and supports Member State efforts to counter organised crime and mitigate the threat to life through operational task forces.**



Headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands, Europol supports the 27 EU Member States in their fight against terrorism, cybercrime and other serious and organised forms of crime. We also work with many non-EU partner states and international organisations. From its various threat assessments to its intelligence-gathering and operational activities, Europol has the tools and resources it needs to do its part in making Europe safer. In 2019, Europol supported 1 874 international operations.

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