



Viewpoint

Drug-related violence: Will COVID-19 drive better data for safer and more secure EU?

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Violence stemming from the illicit drug market in the European Union (EU) has a wide-spread detrimental impact on communities and threatens the security of European citizens. Tackling this societal risk is urgent, as reflected at policy level. The new EU Agenda and Action Plan on Drugs 2021–2025 calls for a renewed impetus to comprehensively tackle the drug situation, including, drug-related violence in communities, among other drug-related crimes (European Commission, 2020).

While not necessarily a primary tool or tactic of actors in the drugs trade, the potential for violence is always present. Recent anecdotal evidence in Western Europe, ranging from the discovery of torture facilities used by organised criminal groups (Associated Press, 2020) to the use of hand grenades in close proximity of open air drug markets (Sturup, Gerell, & Rostami, 2019), could be interpreted as pointing to an uptick in the use of violence associated with drug markets. However, it is always possible to find examples of localized outbursts of violent crime or novel forms of violence. In the absence of consistent data, there is no real way to reliably gauge the dynamics of drug-related violent crime nor to investigate how it is impacted by policy decisions or other external factors. This is particularly pertinent at times when the regular functioning of the drug trade — e.g. trafficking routes, modus operandi — is disrupted. At such times there is potential for the risk of violent outcomes to be heightened. It may be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures introduced by governments to contain it are creating just such disruptions (EMCDDA-Europol, 2020).

At present there are substantial gaps in the available data. Data from official (population-based) sources do not always carry a sufficient level of detail to establish the role drugs play in violent incidents. Furthermore, many drug-related violent incidents remain unreported. In the absence of a full picture of the level of drug-related violence, it can be necessary to use other related indicators for which

data is more readily available. Drug-related homicide is widely considered to be a viable proxy for drug-related violence, as homicides, unlike other crimes, leave a body behind, making this offence more visible and detectable by the authorities (Ouimet and Montmagny-Grenier, 2014). Even though there are difficulties compiling and processing these homicide data (Goldstein, Brownstein, & Ryan, 1992) — establishing drug links in homicide cases requires a detailed analysis of the case files — establishing such links for other types of violent crime is at least as challenging. Simply put, there is more, and usually better and more reliable information available on homicide than on most other violent crimes (Smit, de Jong, & Bijleveld, 2012) and the number of homicides in Europe is such that review and analysis are relatively feasible (at 3993 cases for the EU in 2018, Eurostat, 2020). Data from a pilot study in the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden indicated that homicides stemming from the functioning of the drug market (systemic as per Goldstein, 1985) is a significant phenomenon and more likely to involve the use of firearms than other types of homicide (EMCDDA, 2019). Taking a wider EU view however, it soon becomes apparent that gaps and inconsistencies exist in the level of detail available in homicide data. For example, just 10 of the 28 EU Member States, Norway and Turkey systematically prepare data on this topic (De Bont, Groshkova, Cunningham, & Liem, 2018). Furthermore, the validity of using drug-related homicide as a proxy for drug related violence is a largely untested hypothesis and the exact relationship between the drug-related homicide and non-lethal drug-related violence is so far unknown.

A fuller understanding of drug-related violence requires good quality data. Having such data consistently up-to-date will provide benefit in policy-making and evaluation, as well as for operational, monitoring and research purposes. For policy-makers, accurate data on drug-related violence will provide a fuller picture of the drugs trade and its societal

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impact — essential for planning and assessing policy responses, priority setting and resource allocation. The drug market is highly dynamic and can respond in unpredictable ways to a multitude of internal and external factors — if policy is to be based on an accurate picture, it is essential that available data is kept up-to-date. At a top level, an understanding of the level of violence stemming from the drug market would give policy-makers a more rounded picture of the overall damage of illicit drugs, which would allow them to make judgements regarding its priority relative to other threats. Furthermore, data on the levels of violence associate with different drug types would allow more informed decisions regarding prioritization and resource allocation. Another aspect of policy-making that could be informed by this data is judicial responses and sentencing guidelines — Amsterdam et al. (2020) highlighted a move in the Netherlands to enable heavier punishment of perpetrators of violence if the crime was committed under the influence of alcohol or illicit substances.

These observations highlight a clear need to establish a European platform for monitoring drug-related homicide and equip those recording data in the field with the tools to appropriately identify and tag drug relationships where these exist in violent events. To that end, the EMCDDA and the European Homicide Monitor group (Granath et al., 2011) are collaborating on crafting those tools for prospective data collection in Europe (EMCDDA, 2020). The successful implementation of this platform will require sustained cooperation from a range of stakeholders in the years to come. If this can be achieved, the data acquired will be able to drive better responses — both policy and operational, and to provide a unique opportunity to further advance the research agenda in this area, for example by empirically testing the relationship between drug-related homicide and wider drug-related violence. One of the consequences of COVID-19 is that it may disrupt the established structures and functioning of the drug market, for instance by restricting the number of established trafficking routes available and the viability of certain modus operandi. Furthermore, the associated economic contraction potentially weakens the revenue streams as well as incentivising new entrants into the drugs business. These factors could lead to increased levels of violent crime as there is heightened competition for market share and infrastructure. The picture here is complex, however, with factors potentially working in opposite directions. A recent European analysis, based on expert opinion of the impact on drug markets of the first wave of the pandemic and the related responses indicated that ‘the restrictions on movement and the increased presence of security forces on the streets seem to have had a positive effect on low-level violent crime’ (EMCDDA-Europol, 2020). These restrictions have subsequently been eased and in many countries the rules for movement and interaction vary from region to region. Given the complex and fragmentary picture, the argument for a sustained push for better data in this area is compelling.

Declarations of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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