

Main findings

Research project “Violence and Small Arms: the Portuguese case” (2008-2010)

The main aim of the research project “Violence and Small Arms: the Portuguese case” (funded by the Science and Technology Foundation, Portugal) was to contribute to the multidimensional characterisation of small arms dissemination in Portugal as well as to the identification of good practices and policy recommendations on armed violence prevention and reduction. Specifically, the project intends to map legal and illegal supply of firearms, to identify its users/bearers and their motivations, to investigate the differentiated impacts of armed violence and analyse existing prevention and combat strategies, promoted by both the State and civil society.

1. Small arms supply in Portugal

Taking stock of the number of small arms registered in Portugal (National Department of Weapons and Explosives, Public Security Police, DAE/PSP), we have estimated a total of 2,6 million of guns in civilian hands. Of these, 1,4 million are legal (54%) and 1,2 million are illegal (46%). Hence, there are 25 firearms for 100 inhabitants.

Portugal represents 4% of all European small arms imports and 3% of the exports (business volume data). Amongst the most imported types of small arms are hunting rifles (57%), pistols and revolvers (25%) and shot-guns (10%). Between 1988 and 2006, these transactions involved more than 390 000 weapons, mostly originated from Germany, Belgium, Brazil, Spain, USA, Italy and Turkey.

The firearms of choice of the Portuguese population are hunting rifles. From a total of 445.360 licences of gun possession and use issued between 2004 and 2008 (an average of 89 000 licences per year), 84,5% correspond to hunting rifles (classes C and D). The districts of major concentration of licences are Lisbon (11,1%), Faro (8,1%), Santarém (7,6%), Setúbal (7,0%) and Porto (7,0%).

The similarities observed between the internal circulation of small arms in civilian hands (the profiles of the guns which were seized, apprehended, delievered and diverted) and the Portuguese imports suggest that part of the weapons in illegal situation have resulted from diversion from legal markets. In fact, between 2004 and 2007, 5913 guns were robbed or diverted in Portugal, that is, 4 guns per day.

2. Small arms demand: male and female adults and youth

Legal users

Taking into consideration the licences of gun possession and use granted in 2008 and 2009 (DAE/PSP), we conclude that men (99%), of Portuguese nationality, with ages between 40 and 64 (58%) constitute the most common profile of the legal gun users in Portugal. During this period, hunting rifle permits constituted the majority of the licences of gun possession and use issued (92%). The jobs with most representativity in this sample were, by order: farmer, construction worker, trader, entrepreneur, driver, engineer, carpenter and mechanic.

Criminal users

Similarly, and according to data of violent crime detainees in 2006 and 2007 (Annual Report on Internal Security, 2007), most criminal users of firearms are men (96%), of Portuguese nationality (over 90%). Amongst the most common criminal uses of firearms are armed robbery, followed by physical offence, and, in far lesser numbers, attempted homicide and homicide.

The interviews conducted in the Central Prison of Coimbra (male prison) – which represents 3,8% of the Portuguese prison population (data of 2009) and where 22% of the detainees are imprisoned for gun-related crimes, confirm this tendency of gun use. Also, these testimonies reveal some patterns in the motivations and characteristics of gun use.

Most interviewees affirmed that the first contact with guns took place in the peer group, during the transition from childhood to adolescence. The presence of guns in the home was also common. Moreover, most of the interlocutors who had contact with guns associated to those values such as protection and defense (particularly regarding their families) and, to lesser extent, to perceptions of power and virility. In some interviews, fatherhood emerged as the main motivation for refusal of gun possession and use, in most cases for the danger guns represent or for the example of conduct that these men wish to avoid giving to their children.

The interviews conducted with the female detainees of the central prison of Tires, which represents 45,6% of the female prison population in Portugal, and where 8% are imprisoned for gun-related crimes, reveal that the contact with guns tends to be than men's and that is often associated to the participation in drug trafficking. Whenever used, either effectively or in an threatening matter, guns are often destined to individual or business protection. Also, a significative part of the testimonies collected shed light on the effective use of guns in domestic violence situations, particularly as a form of reaction of women to a history of abuse.

In Portugal, according to data from the General Directorate for Social Reinsertion (2009), 204 youth are interned in Educational Centres. Of these, 89% are male (181) and 11% female (23). Despite being little expressive in statistical terms (the effective use of firearms tends to be residual), when existent, the involvement with violence and guns often take place in the peer group, namely in schools and surrounding spaces. These contacts and uses are frequently associated to drug trafficking, in the case of young males and females. The majority of those refer a mix of sensations at the time of the first contact with guns: fear and powerfulness. The symbolic function of guns as a way to obtain access to material goods and statute was recurrently mentioned in the interviews conducted with young males.

Nevertheless, if we look closely at the number of youth interned in Education Centres in Portugal (204), we conclude that this number corresponds to only 0,015% of the total of the youth population residing in Portugal (1,6 million) and 2% of the Portuguese prison population. This reality, which is similar to other European countries (European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics, 2003), corroborates the narratives collected, indicating that a great percentage of young people choose not to participate in illegal practices and/or violent ones, specially those involving guns.

3. The differentiated impacts of gun violence

Direct victimation: the dead and injured

Between 2003 and 2008, 682 people have died as a result of gun violence in Portugal (National Institute of Legal Medicine, 2009). Of these, 16% were women (109). That is, in Portugal, at least 2 people are killed each week by guns, most of them male.

In the same period, 2047 victims of gun violence entered the hospitals, mostly young males (47,1%), with ages between 20 and 39 years old. During this period, there were 715 accidents with guns and 604 with blunt objects; 702 homicides and attempted homicides with firearms and 1440 with blunt objects; and 229 suicides and auto-inflicted injuries with guns versus 2164 with blunt objects. 62 children from 0 to 14 years old (8% of the universe of all accidents) were victims of accidental gun use, mainly provoked by pistols.

Meanwhile, the year of 2008 registered less 46 victims of gun use than those registered in 2006 (and less 12 than registered in 2007).

Domestic violence and small arms

According to data from RASI (2006), in 2006 66 firearms were used in domestic violence contexts (36 handguns and 30 hunting rifles), making up 1% of all registered incidents of domestic violence (11 638) and 11% of all domestic violence incidents involving weapons (firearms, blunt objects and others) (617). In 2007, the number of firearms used in these

circumstances lowered to 49 (30 cases of handgun use and 19 of hunting rifles), which represents 0,7 % of all reported cases of domestic violence (13 050) and 7% of all domestic violence incidents involving all types of weapons (696) (RASI, 2007). In 2008, the Police registered 81 cases of gun use in domestic violence situation, which corresponds to 0,5% of all cases of reported domestic violence incidents (17 648) and 37% of the universe of weapon use (including blunt objects) in contexts of intra-familial violence in that year (218) (RASI, 2009).

Given the insufficiencies of these official data, a survey was developed and applied nation-wide, between October 2009 and March 2010, in partnership with the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) and the Portuguese Association for Victim Support (APAV), in order to assess the role of guns in violence against women, particularly intrafamiliar.

Of the 101 women who have resorted to APAV and accepted to respond to the survey, 30,7% referred that their culprit had access or owned a firearm. Also relevant is the percentage of the women who affirmed *not knowing* if their intimate partner had a gun in the home (39%). *Not knowing* means that women have to deal with this doubt and, consequentially, with the eminence of discovering its existence. It also means that to maintain and perpetuate a relation of domination and power, guns don't necessarily have to be used or seen. According to the survey, the threat of gun use is the most common form of intimidation, exceeding the situations of gun pointing and exhibition.

Beyond the bullet: survivors of gun violence

Gun violence marks, in a heterogeneous way, the lives of the population, going beyond the official data on the dead and injured with firearms. If we take into consideration that between 2003 and 2008 2047 incidents involving firearms took place in Portugal and that, on average, the Portuguese households are made up by 2,8 people (National Statistics Institute, INE, 2006), 5731 people have survived loss and/or trauma in this period. These are relatives of direct victims of gun violence, who suffer physically, psychologically, socially and economically as a result of their loss. To ignore them and the burden they share means to perpetuate cycles of violences.

Putting a tag on armed violence costs

Putting aside costs associated to crime anticipation, crime response and also broader costs such as those related to the fear of crime, and focusing only on the direct (hospital care and productivity losses) and indirect costs of gun violence (suffering and losses in quality of life), we have (under)estimated an average annual cost of around 108 million in the period of 2003-2008, a cost by far inferior to other those indicated in other studies and countries.

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