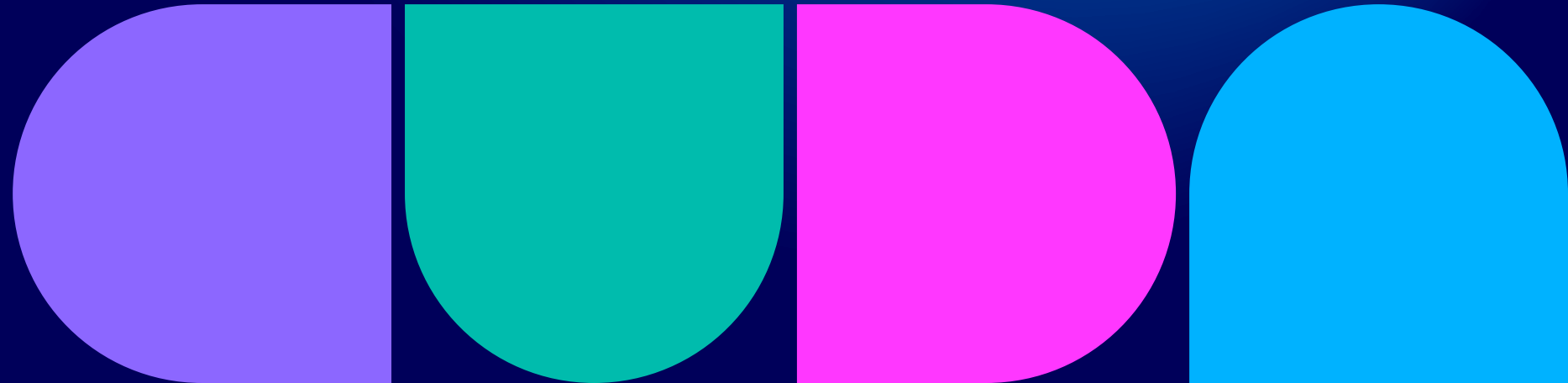


# European Conference on Drug-Related Violence

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# An assessment of violence and organised crime: homicides and explosives attacks

National Crime Assessment 2024



# **An assessment of violence and organised crime: homicides and explosives attacks**

## **Summary**

**Frank Boerman, Ewout Stoffers, Danijel Tadic**

Commissioned by the Netherlands Police's National Intelligence Coordinator and the Police Chief of National Intelligence, Expertise and Operational Support, strategic phenomenon assessments were drawn up in 2024. These pertain to the police's prioritised security themes as included in the National Intelligence Agenda (NIA). The national strategic assessment of drug-related serious and organised crime is part of this series.

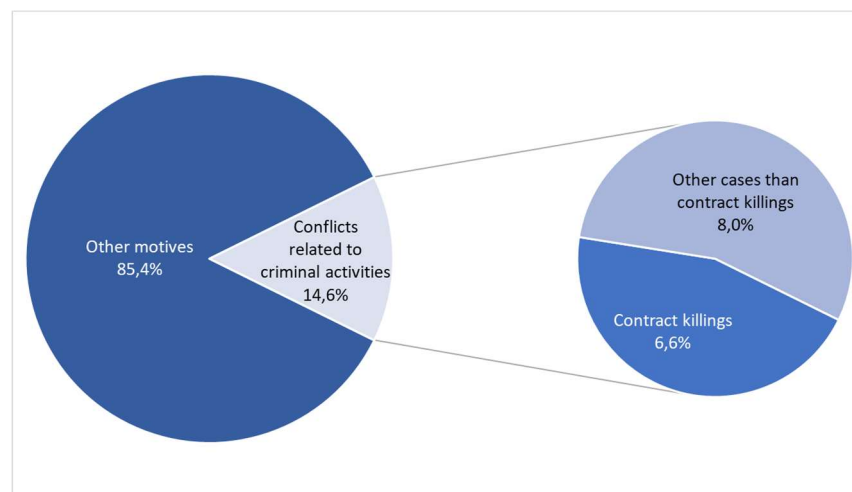
## Violence and organized crime: Homicides and explosives attacks

This report on violence is part of a series of strategic assessments commissioned by the National Intelligence Coordinator of the Netherlands Police (published in 2024). The objective of this assessment is to provide insights for police response strategies. The research for this assessment focuses on two manifestations of violence directed against persons within the domain of organized crime: homicides and explosives attacks.

### Homicides related to criminal activities in perspective

In the Netherlands, data from 2016 to 2023 reveals that out of 965 cases of murder and manslaughter, 14% were classified as homicides related to criminal activities. This is the case if the perpetrator as well as the victim engage in criminal activities. We use the term contract killing if there was also a premeditated murder plan. On average eight contract killings occurred per year in the Netherlands between 2016 and 2023. However, in 2023, this figure was reduced to three.

During the period studied, one out of every 15 homicides was a contract killing. A majority of homicides are not related to criminal activities; most cases of homicide occur within relational contexts or due to other types of disputes. Furthermore, since 2017, a downward trend in the number of contract killings has been observed.



### Spread in time and space of contract killings and other homicides related to criminal activities

An analysis of the geographical and temporal distribution of homicides reveals distinctions between contract killings (involving premeditated murder plans) and other homicides related to criminal activities (where situations have escalated beyond control). While it is acknowledged that the major cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam are notable hotspots for both contract killings and other crime related homicides, it is observed that where contract killings remain predominantly concentrated in and around three of the largest cities in the Netherlands, the other cases are distributed more evenly across the country. Furthermore, while contract killings primarily occur on public roads (66%) or parking lots (16%), the other cases are more often carried out indoors (39%, compared to 16% of the contract killings). It is also noteworthy that contract killings do not typically occur during broad daylight hours (33%); instead, they are primarily concentrated in the evening and nighttime periods (67%). Furthermore, contract killings are more prevalent during the week than on weekends, while this is not the case for the other cases. These differences may be explained by the planned nature of contract killings, which is lacking in the other cases. For instance, in preparation for contract killings criminals often study their targets' daily routines. These routines appear to be more predictable on weekdays, thereby increasing the likelihood of contract killings to occur on those days.

### **No increased risk to bystanders when using fully automatic firearms**

In almost half of all contract killings in the Netherlands, there was no risk to bystanders becoming victims (48%), given that, in addition to the perpetrator and victim, no other individuals were present at the scene. In slightly less than half of all contract killings (41%), the risk was found to be high. For the other cases of homicides related to criminal activities, the proportion with high risk was lower (27%). While contract killings invariably entail firearm violence, in one out of five other cases of crime related homicides, alternative methods of violence were employed, such as the use of a stabbing or striking weapon. It is noteworthy that cases devoid of firearms almost invariably entail low risk to bystanders. Consequently, firearms pose a greater risk to bystanders than other weapons in this context. The type of firearm, whether fully automatic or not, does not play a significant role in this regard. When fully automatic firearms such as Kalashnikovs and Scorpions are used, the percentage with a high risk to bystanders is similar to cases where non-fully automatic firearms, such as Glocks and Lugers, were used (43% versus 40%).

### **Don't rely on your friends**

A contract killing is more frequently issued from within one's own criminal group than from opposing groups. This conclusion results from an analysis of the underlying motives that precipitate contract killings. The term 'own criminal group' is used to denote criminals with whom a cooperative relationship is maintained or for whom assistance is provided. The most prevalent motives to assassinate one's own criminal group member are non-performance (in drug trade or in carrying out contract killings), theft from the group (of drugs or money) and (alleged) snitching to law enforcement or criminal opponents. From this finding we conclude that the prevailing view that the primary motive for a contract killing is rivalry among adversaries is incorrect. The predominant threat of becoming a victim of a contract killing comes from within one's own criminal network.



### **Sellers and owners of drugs relatively often victimized in drug deals and drug rips**

In virtually all homicides related to criminal activities without a premeditated murder plan (25 of 26 cases), the victim and perpetrator know each other and the offence is drug related. The most prevalent type of incident involves the fatal shooting of an owner or seller of drugs by the buyer, occurring on fourteen occasions due to the buyer's refusal to pay, and three instances due to the seller's failure to deliver the goods. In addition, during drug rips, owners of the drugs or guarding personnel are frequently victims of unexpected confrontations. We registered six cases resulting in the death of an owner or guardian and two cases that led to the death of a ripper.

### **Attempts to resolve criminal conflicts frequently end badly**

In many cases, crime related homicides are preceded by existing conflicts. However, it should be noted that this does not always imply there was an intention to kill prior to the act. During 2016-2023, out of 77 crime related homicides we registered 35 events in which both parties met and instead of resolving the conflict it escalated, resulting in a fatal victim. Of these, 11 cases involved extortion or threats, 8 involved monetary debt and 7 involved a drug-related incident that preceded the encounter.

### **More than three-quarters of contract killings cocaine-related, quarter of other homicide cases cannabis-related**

Cases of homicide related to criminal activities predominantly occur within the context of the drug scene. A considerable proportion of these cases are associated with cocaine trafficking. This phenomenon is particularly evident in contract killings (78%) and, to a lesser extent, in other crime related homicides (33%). Conversely, the other crime related homicide cases exhibit a relatively higher association with the cannabis market (25% versus 5%). To illustrate this point, consider cases where an attempt to secretly steal the harvest of a hemp plantation fails and leads to an unintended confrontation with deadly consequences.

We conclude that within the context of the cocaine market, planned killings are significantly more prevalent than within the cannabis market. Fatalities also occur because of interests in the synthetic drug market and the heroin market, but less frequently (9% and 4%).

### **Shooters/perpetrators are not getting younger**

While the findings of this study demonstrate a decline in the average age of perpetrators of crime related homicides, this does not indicate that those involved in such criminal activities are getting younger over time. The average age of shooters in contract killings fell from 29 years in 2016 to 25 years in 2023, and for perpetrators of other homicide cases, it fell from 39 years in 2016 to 25 years in 2023. This decline in the average age can be attributed to a decrease in the involvement of older shooters over time, rather than an increase in the involvement of younger shooters. For instance, in 2017, the youngest perpetrator of a crime related homicide was 15 years old and the oldest was 59, while in 2023, the youngest was 18 and the oldest was 30.

### **Nearly all perpetrators have a criminal track record prior to committing a contract killing**

Research into the criminal careers of individuals who have committed a contract killing during the period 2016-2021 indicates that the vast majority of identified perpetrators were known to the police. On average, an offender has 27 criminal activity registrations by the police to his name. Furthermore, a significant proportion of these individuals initiate their criminal careers during their teenage years, with an average age of onset being 16 years. Five individuals have already been suspected of a criminal offence before the age of 12. This suggests that prior to committing a contract killing, perpetrators have already established a considerable track record.



### **Criminal career of shooters: high degree of violence without specialization**

One out of three shooters of contract killings engage in violent crimes at the beginning of their criminal careers, with 90 per cent having already committed crimes that involved a violent element prior to engaging in contract killings. Furthermore, 22 out of 52 shooters have a documented history of suspected homicide or attempted homicide. Thirteen shooters were suspected of homicide once, eight twice, and one shooter five times. However, it should be noted that the aforementioned shooters do not specialize exclusively in violence; they commit a variety of other crimes. Consequently, it is determined that violent crimes do not constitute the majority of their recorded offences.

Furthermore, it appears that the seriousness of offences does not increase over the course of the criminal career for every shooter. In fact, there are somewhat more shooters with de-escalating than escalating careers.



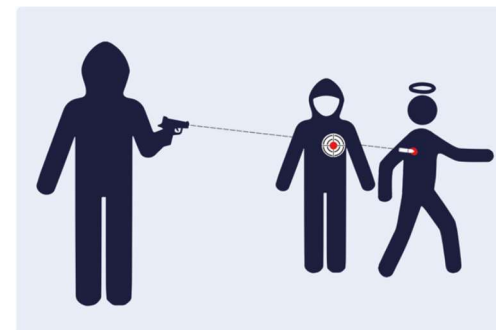
### **A decline in fatalities resulting from contract killings, no such decline for other homicide cases**

Of the total of 149 crime related homicide victims (from 2016 to 2023) slightly less than half were victims of contract killings (69). The number of victims of contract killings decreased from seventeen in 2017 to three in 2023. The number of victims due to other cases of homicide related to criminal activities was also relatively high in 2017 but has shown a fairly stable trend thereafter.

### **More persons get killed because they happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time than as a result of mistaken identity**

In practice, not all contract killings go according to the premeditated plan. Consequently, unintended casualties may ensue. This phenomenon has been observed in one out of every six fatalities resulting from contract killings. Of these, the victims as a result of "mistaken identity" receive significant attention in media coverage. These occurrences pertain to instances wherein an individual is murdered due to an incorrect identification of the person as another individual. In the Netherlands there were four such cases in the period from 2016 to 2023. However, a different category of victim is also worthy of consideration in the context of contract killings: those who are killed because they are at the wrong place at the wrong time. We identified seven of these cases.

We conclude that, in general, more persons get killed because they happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time than as a result of mistaken identity.



### **The number of explosives attacks has increased exponentially**

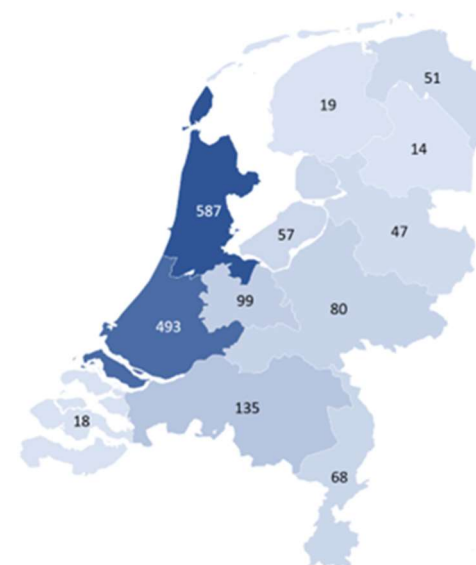
In the Netherlands, there has been a marked increase in the number of explosives attacks since 2021. These incidents involve the detonation of explosive materials with the intent to intimidate or coerce individuals. Police figures show that the number of attacks has roughly doubled each year since 2021: from 212 to 439 in 2022, to 1017 in 2023. This indicates a fourfold increase in attacks in the Netherlands since 2021.

### Attacks across the country, but especially in urban areas

Two thirds of explosives attacks in the Netherlands have been recorded in two provinces: Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland. Urban areas are disproportionately impacted. Furthermore, it is notable that more than one third of all attacks in the Netherlands during the period 2021-2023 occurred in the three major cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. By contrast, Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Randstad, has experienced a comparatively limited number of attacks, with only 39 recorded.

In Noord-Holland, cities with a high number of attacks in the past three years include Amsterdam (343), Purmerend (25), Haarlem (23) and Alkmaar (21). In Zuid-Holland, the cities of Rotterdam (187) and The Hague (95) have also been subject to significant numbers of attacks.

Attacks have also been documented in other regions of the country, though with reduced frequency. The provinces of Drenthe and Zeeland have recorded the lowest number of attacks. However, a rising trend is evident across all provinces.



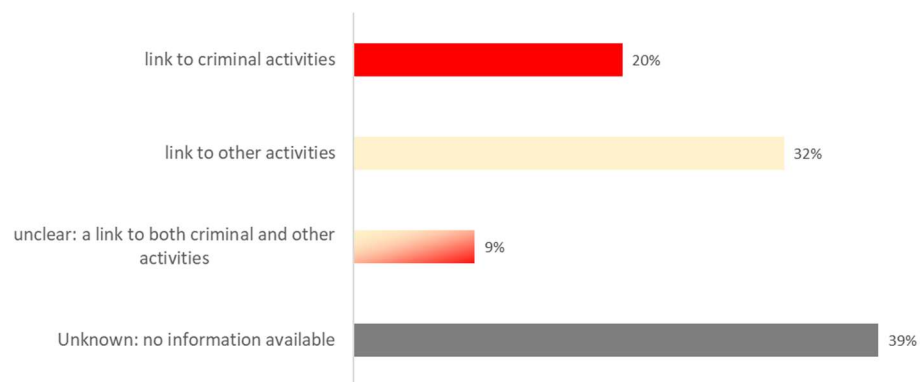
### Explosives attacks in the Netherlands skyrocketing in Europe

A review of incidents involving explosives in neighboring countries indicates the exceptional position of the Netherlands. Of the twelve European countries for which data were obtained, three report a substantial number of attacks (more than fifty). Germany is a notable example in this regard, with a significant proportion of explosives attacks that are mainly politically motivated and primarily involve throwing Molotov cocktails at law enforcement personnel. In Belgium, there's evidence of involvement of Dutch criminal networks in some of the attacks. In Sweden, local criminal gangs engage in threats and extortion through explosives attacks. Excluding the politically motivated incidents in Germany involving Molotov cocktails, the number of attacks involving explosives in other countries is significantly lower than in the Netherlands, thus making the Netherlands an outlier in Europe.

### Domestic conflicts are more prevalent than criminal conflicts

A closer study of some of the explosives attacks provides insight into the motive. This also allowed to determine whether an attack is linked to criminal or other activities. A significant proportion of attacks has no link with criminal activities. Instead of crime related disputes, it is more often about conflicts between non-criminal actors.

If we assume that the distribution of cases where the underlying motive remains unknown (39%) resembles the ratio between criminal- and other activities cases (20% versus 32%), then a significant proportion of explosives attacks is estimated (56%) to lack a link to criminal activities. This finding has important implications for policy- and law enforcement strategies to tackle explosives attacks.



### **Fireworks, fireworks and more fireworks**

The use of fireworks in explosives attacks has been a recurring theme in The Netherlands in recent years. A significant proportion of explosives attacks involve heavy, professional fireworks: 80 per cent from 2021-2023. Often, these fireworks are *flashbangers*, fireworks ignited by a fuse or friction. This category also includes 'Cobras', a well-known pyrotechnic manufacturer brand. These and other types of heavy, professional fireworks have also been known to function as building material for home-made improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Furthermore, we've seen explosives attacks carried out by the use of a combination of fireworks and fuel (firebomb).

The use of heavy, professional fireworks is increasing. This is not solely attributable to the substantial rise in explosives attacks. We also see a proportional increase in the use of fireworks in explosives attacks. In 2021, the proportion of fireworks in explosives attacks accounted for 76% of the total number of registered attacks. This figure continued to rise, in 2023 reaching 82% of over a thousand registered explosives attacks. Furthermore, analysis of forensic evidence revealed that 'Cobra' flashbangers were used in nearly half of the explosives attacks in 2023. Given forensic investigative challenges to determine what kind of fireworks has been used in explosives attacks, this proportion represents a lower limit of the actual proportion.

The high explosive power, ease of availability and relatively low price of flashbangers make it attractive to continue to use heavy, professional fireworks to commit explosives attacks.

### **The underestimation of the explosive power of fireworks**

It has been documented from a variety of sources that the Dutch fireworks culture influences the perception of the use of heavy, professional fireworks, whether illegally obtained or produced, among consumers. It is assumed to be associated with an underestimation of the risks posed by professional fireworks. This can contribute to a reluctance among parents to voice strong disapproval regarding the use of such fireworks by their children. The lack of awareness regarding the explosive power of professional fireworks plays a significant role in this laidback attitude among parents. To illustrate this point, the "striker" of the past contains 0.8 grams of flashpowder; today's flashbanger from Cobra contains flashpowder ranging from 25 to 110 grams. This means that the explosive capacity of a flashbanger such as a Cobra is comparable to that of military explosives such as TNT. The use of such fireworks, including both flashbangers and other types of professional fireworks, as well as improvised explosive devices (IEDs) based on these fireworks, poses a lethal danger to persons nearby. Furthermore, the use of these fireworks and IEDs can result in injuries and hearing damage, even when the individual is at a considerable distance from the site of detonation. Also, the combination of improvised explosives derived from heavy, professional fireworks with flammable substances has been demonstrated to exacerbate the consequences, thereby introducing a significant risk of fire.

Considering the risks, it is more appropriate to categorize heavy, professional fireworks as "fireworks explosives". These fireworks explosives are regularly, and sometimes in large batches, transported dangerously through the Netherlands with a risk of large-scale explosions. These transports are appointed to by experts as "driving bombs". Furthermore, these types of fireworks are stored unsafely. This poses a significant risk to civilians, as they are susceptible to becoming victims in the event of an unexpected detonation, whether during transportation or in storage facilities.



### **Wrong address**

An attack with an explosive can be arranged quickly. Through social media platforms, mainly young individuals are approached to execute a swift attack with an explosive device. Mistakes are regularly made during this process. Mistakes in the use of street names, house numbers and place names have been observed. Consequently, explosive devices are being detonated at incorrect addresses and cities.

Furthermore, explosives are deliberately detonated at homes of persons other than the intended target. In certain cases, perpetrators may be unaware of the actual targets' locations. By committing explosives attacks at homes of relatives, friends or partners, pressure may be exerted on the actual target.

### **Information about the involvement of clients and brokers is scarce**

The use of explosives enables individuals to threaten others with whom they have disputes. The facilitation of such an attack typically requires the sheer engagement of young individuals willing to place an explosive device in exchange for financial compensation. In some cases, the involvement of a broker may be necessary. This individual occupies a pivotal role in receiving directives from multiple sources and orchestrating the execution of explosives attacks. He places orders with contractors through several intermediaries. This arrangement ensures that clients who ordered the explosives attack remain anonymous. This is less true for youngsters carrying out the explosives attack, they risk being identified or captured on camera. This dynamic has resulted in the apprehension of numerous suspects carrying out explosives attacks over the past two years. However, this has not led to a reduction in attacks. The arrested perpetrators are simply replaced by others, predominantly juveniles.



### **The illicit trade in heavy, professional fireworks**

Most explosives attacks in the Netherlands are perpetrated using heavy, professional fireworks obtained from the illicit trade (80%). In comparison to the illicit drug trade, the Dutch illegal fireworks trade is relatively modest in scale. The market is dominated by a small number of partnerships. These partnerships procure fireworks from various sources, including China, Italy, Poland and Albania. From warehouses abroad, the top dealers then sell on to a group of several dozen large dealers, most of whom have a criminal background. These traffickers employ various shielding methods to conceal their activities. They employ complex purchasing- and money laundering constructions, use advanced technological and digital shielding strategies and deploy straw men. Resales to brokers are facilitated within networks meticulously constructed to ensure secure communication between traders. Social media platforms such as Telegram, Snapchat and WhatsApp facilitate communication between middlemen and end users. The transfer of goods is then typically executed at designated public meeting points, e.g. from vans, cars or scooters.



## Colofon

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