




Breaking the cycle: addressing the evolving dynamic of violence associated with the European drug market

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

While the greatest share of violence associated with drug markets has historically been borne in the Global South (UNODC, 2023), this phenomenon is now increasingly recognised as a pressing security concern within Europe. What was once perceived as a problem confined to specific “hotspots” such as major importation hubs is now recognised as a more generalised and growing challenge to public safety, health and social cohesion. These developments generate considerable public and policy concern, profoundly impacting communities and civil security across Europe.

The multifaceted nature of drug-related violence extends beyond simple market disputes, requiring a nuanced understanding of several distinct drivers. Criminal governance literature highlights violence as a key regulatory tool in illicit markets, particularly in establishing and defending territory between competing criminal organisations (Gambetta, 1993; Lessing, 2021; Varese, 2017). However, violence also functions internally within criminal networks to enforce discipline, punish transgressions and manage leadership succession, given the absence of formal legal resource for contract enforcement (Kostelnik and Skarbek, 2013; Reuter, 2009; Warburton, 2025). Furthermore, violence serves as a critical mechanism for debt recovery in an illicit economy lacking formal legal channels (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2017).

Acknowledging this complexity highlights a core problem underlying both our understanding and ability to react: the lack of robust,

systematic data on drug-related violence across European countries that is nuanced to reflect the different forms drug-related violence may take. This data gap hampers effective cross-national comparisons, impedes evidence-informed policy decisions and risks reliance on anecdotal reports or public perceptions. This conclusion was acknowledged by experts meeting at the First European Conference on Drug-Related Violence (Brussels, November 2024). The meeting's conclusions identified the need for actions to put in place the analytical capacity and systems necessary to understand better the evolving nature of the threat posed by drug market violence in Europe in order to assist the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) and other stakeholders identify the strategic priorities that need to be addressed to improve Europe's policy resilience and preparedness in this area.

In line with the conference's Call to Action (EUDA 2024), this article outlines the context of drug market-related violence in Europe and identifies four strategic priority areas for Europe's future response (1) strengthening data collection and monitoring, (2) developing city-level information sources and collaborations, (3) evaluating and sharing good practices in prevention and enforcement and (4) establishing a regular forum for information exchange. The subsequent sections discuss each priority area in turn, seeking to “break the cycle” of market-related violence through evidence-informed and coordinated action. It is important to note that the intention here is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of how Europe needs to respond to violence linked to the drug market. Rather, we wish to inform a more strategic discussion on what

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should be our current priorities at European level for strengthening responses.

Changing patterns of drug-market related violence in Europe: a complex phenomenon

While the overall picture remains heterogenous, violence is no longer solely concentrated in historically recognised urban hotspots; it now extends along trafficking routes and impacts smaller European cities and municipalities previously largely unaffected (Liem and Moeller, 2025). Importantly, drug market violence is rapidly evolving, for example through the increased recruitment and exploitation of young people (Redmond, 2016; Sheehan et al., 2024), often through social media (Harding, 2020; Warburton, 2024). People who use drugs, or vulnerable individuals who may be recruited into minor drug market roles may also now be at a growing risk of becoming victims of systemic violence. Whilst urban areas still experience more systemic drug-related firearms violence (Krüsselmann et al., 2024) suburban and rural areas are no longer immune from this problem.

The perceived escalation of drug market-related violence has been linked to a number of recent developments, including the expansion of large-volume trafficking through maritime routes and intensified competition between criminal networks (EMCDDA, 2024; EMCDDA-Europol, 2024). The high levels of supply have coincided with sustained high demand for certain drugs in Europe, creating lucrative market opportunities (EMCDDA, 2024). Resorting to violence increasingly appears to be a tactic used by criminal groups to secure territory and increase market share in this environment. Additionally, and of particular concern, the availability and use of more lethal means, such as firearms and explosives, is increasingly visible in some European countries, both raising the potential for criminal groups to resort to violence and increasing the casualties that may arise from this (Gerell et al. 2021; Krüsselmann et al., 2023; Krüsselmann et al., 2021; Magnusson 2023; Sturup et al., 2020).

However, attributing the rise in market-related violence solely to external market dynamics does not fully capture the complexity of the issue. Contemporary criminological research has identified mechanisms by which violence forms an integral part of the regulation of drug markets. Violence between criminal organisations can arise as they compete for territory and market share (Gambetta, 1993; Varese, 2017; Lessing, 2021). It also functions internally within criminal organisations as a tool to enforce discipline, punish rule violations (Warburton, 2025; Kostelnik and Skarbek, 2013) and settle disputes in the absence of legal frameworks (Reuter, 2009). Given these points, attributing rising drug market-related violence primarily to changes to the external environment (such as increased supply or access to firearms) remains speculative. While plausible, the scarcity of robust comparative data precludes definitive conclusions and a more nuanced understanding of the relative contributions made by turf wars, internal disputes and external factors to the overall dynamics of violence in drug markets.

Against this backdrop, the EUDA (2024) highlighted four priorities, which are elaborated in the following sections.

Strategic priorities for addressing market-related violence

Recognising the escalating threat posed by drug-related violence, European stakeholders are emphasising the need for effective, coordinated action. Key initiatives, particularly ProtectEU, the EU Drugs Strategy and the EU Action Plan against Drug Trafficking, are essential in addressing this challenge (European Commission, 2025a, European Commission, 2025b, European Commission, 2025c). In late 2024, the EUDA, in collaboration with the European Commission, convened a high-level conference urging a unified European approach centred on anticipating, preventing and responding to the growing complexities.

1. Strengthening data collection and monitoring

The lack of consistent and comparable data on drug-market-related violence across Europe is a fundamental barrier to understanding and addressing the issue. Currently, there is no Europe-wide systematic indicator for such violence, and national data are often poorly developed or even absent, making it extremely challenging to assess the scope and trends of the problem or to evaluate policy actions and/or other factors that may impact to reduce violence (Groshkova et al., 2021). This can be juxtaposed against the strong public and political perceptions of worsening levels of drug-market-related violence, often generated by anecdotal media accounts. Strengthening data collection and monitoring is therefore the first strategic priority necessary for developing evidence informed policy responses.

A compelling example of how the data deficit impedes understanding can be found in the debate over the age of perpetrators of violent acts. While Swedish data indicates a decline in the age of individuals involved in gun-related homicides (Selin et al., 2024), suggesting a potential shift to younger, more volatile criminal groups, others at the European Conference challenged the generalisation of this trend. They argued that the limited data simply suggested older perpetrators were dying or retiring (Adjiembaks et al., 2023). This underscores the importance of caution against overgeneralising from specific national experience and highlights the need for more nuanced data that can contribute at the European level to a more accurate interpretation of overall trends that is necessary to inform the development of appropriate response models.

The development of a European system for prospective data collection and analysis of drug-related homicide-defined as homicides linked to the functioning of the drug market or through use and/or economic motives (Goldstein, 1985; Liem and Moeller, 2025)-is a positive step made possible by the new EUDA mandate (OJEU, 2023). Through partnership with a range of stakeholders, this initiative has the opportunity to provide a key piece of the puzzle necessary to better understand drug-related violence in Europe. A standardised framework is being implemented to report incidents across Europe. Early results are expected to provide insights into key questions, although differences in national definition and data collection challenges remain. These challenges are non-trivial, requiring resource-intensive collation and careful case-by-case assessment. Despite these issues, the initiative is a critical “proof of concept,” demonstrating that collecting and reporting such data is possible and can yield useful insights.

Beyond homicides, there is a broader need for indicators and monitoring systems covering other forms of drug-market violence. Developing reliable and sensitive indicators in this area is difficult but not impossible. Possible approaches include: adding specific questions to existing crime reporting systems, conducting dedicated surveys and using new tools to detect patterns of incidents that might otherwise go unreported officially, with advances in Artificial Intelligence being of potential benefit here.

Improved data and monitoring would enable more targeted responses, provide a baseline to measure trends over time and help evaluate responses. This will require investment and capacity-building, with the EUDA partnering with national and local authorities, who hold the frontline data.

2. Developing city-level information sources and partnerships

Drug-related violence, while a national or international issue by nature, manifests most concretely at the local level, often in cities or specific neighbourhoods. Major port cities, urban drug markets and border towns are often points of drug-market violence. A one-size-fits-all national view can miss critical local variations. The second strategic priority is therefore to develop city-based information sources and strengthen local collaborations.

Local authorities are on the front line of responding to incidents and possess rich contextual knowledge not always visible in national statistics. Engaging city-level actors in information-sharing can thus provide a more nuanced picture of market-related violence. To that aim, it is

important to map and build on existing initiatives so cities develop dedicated monitoring of drug-market dynamics and associated violence. Moreover, engaging local communities and services is important, with structured forums that involve community stakeholders in anticipating and addressing drug-related violence.

Each city or region may have unique drivers of drug-related violence; therefore it is important that a priority is placed on developing city-level information. This means empowering local authorities to collect and act on data pertinent to their situation. Of course, city-level efforts shouldn't remain siloed. The goal is to feed local insights into the national and European picture while strategic partnerships such as with the European Forum for Urban security are important. By developing city-based information sources and partnerships, we recognise that effective solutions will often be bottom-up, empowering cities and regions to gather data, engage communities and tailor interventions.

3. Evaluating and sharing good practices (context-sensitive interventions)

The third strategic priority focuses on the identification, evaluation and dissemination of "good practices" for preventing and reducing market-related violence. Despite increasing concern, evidence on what works is still relatively scarce, especially in the European context. Interventions have been tried, but few have been rigorously evaluated and results from one country may not directly translate to another. Nevertheless, there are lessons that can be learned and successful initiatives may be adapted to suit local contexts (Ivert and Mellgren, 2025).

At the 2024 European Conference, various initiatives were presented, ranging from law-enforcement-led operations to community and social programmes. A common thread was the emphasis on multi-stakeholder engagement and support, viewed as more successful (e.g. MILDECA, 2025). Three examples of which are highlighted below.

In Ireland, the Greentown programme (supported by the Department of Justice) has since 2016 closely examined the activities of criminal networks that are involved in drug sales and in which young people are active members. A data gathering tool named "Twinsight" has been developed for this purpose, which combines the systemic analytical qualities of social network analysis with the ability to mine the knowledge of police officers to understand deeply embedded structures and processes which permit these networks to operate (Redmond, 2016).

The prototype Greentown programme is the product of five years of empirical research and deliberative design with scientific leaders in the areas of organised crime and social network analysis and with expertise in the areas of youth crime policy, child welfare, probation, policing and community development. The programme, informed by previous learning represents a new strategic approach capable of intervening across multiple systems in neighbourhoods. This includes young people, their families, community stakeholders and malign network actors via police-led disruptive tactics. Importantly as with all complex designs in complex contexts, the programme is subject to routine review, rethink and reset (Naughton et al 2023). Importantly, this work has generated several policy impacts. New legislation informed by the Greentown programme now makes it a separate offence for adults to groom young people under 18 years old for involvement in crime (Department of Justice, 2025). In addition, a new neighbourhood-based intervention programme is currently being trialled.

In Sweden, the National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) initiated the "Stop Shooting" project in Malmö in 2018, adapting the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy developed in the United States (US, Kennedy and Friedrich, 2014). This focused deterrence programme aims to reduce gun violence by bringing together law enforcement, social services and community representatives. At its core, the intervention uses structured "call-ins" to communicate a clear message to individuals active in what are identified as violent groups. Participants are informed of legal consequences for continued violence and offered support to leave criminal environments. Evaluations of the "Stop Shooting"

initiative in Malmö have suggested it may have been effective in reducing gun violence and increasing community safety through fostering stronger cooperation between police, prison and probation services, municipalities and local communities (Hedlund et al., 2024). The GVI strategy is now being rolled-out to five additional municipalities across Sweden and is continuously evaluated.

In 2020, France's Interministerial Mission for combating Drugs and Addictive Behaviours (MILDECA) launched the LIMITS programme to reduce minors' involvement in drug trafficking and violence. Piloted in three cities, the programme used educational toolkits, peer-produced videos, and community engagement (MILDECA, 2025). After a successful pilot, it has been expanded since January 2024 to 30 cities and municipalities. A new evaluation began in 2025, with almost 6 million euros-seized from drug traffickers-allocated to the programme.

These three examples highlight the importance of including programme evaluation to strengthen the evidence-base needed for further investment, service expansion and development of new interventions. They also highlight the need to invest in more European studies as much of the existing evidence-base on the effectiveness of interventions in this area is derived from US studies that may not be directly relevant to the European context. The priority here has two parts: evaluating interventions and sharing good practices. Europe needs to collaborate to evaluate and adapt successful strategies and pursue dedicated research to tailor responses to its unique context. By sharing what works and what doesn't, we can build a cycle of continuous learning and improvement.

4. Establishing a forum for information exchange

Recognising the complexity of drug-related violence, an ongoing, multi-level dialogue among diverse stakeholders is critical. The fourth strategic priority is therefore to create a sustained forum for information exchange. Building on the foundations laid by the first European Conference and EUDA's Call to Action, future structured forums will prioritise data-driven strategies, further cooperation and holistic policy development. Ultimately, by establishing a regular forum for sustained collaboration, information sharing and adaptation, Europe will be better equipped to address market-related violence in the long term, anticipating threats, sharing alerts and responding jointly.

Conclusion

The European Union stands at a critical juncture in addressing the threat of drug market-related violence. This article has advanced a clear viewpoint: that effective, evidence-informed responses hinge on closing the critical evidence gap around what shapes drug-market violence. Without robust data, our understanding remains fragmented, and interventions risk being reactive and misdirected. The nature of drug market-related violence is complex and evolving, driven by market competition, market volatility internal organisational dynamics and the illicit enforcement of debts. A coherent and effective strategy demands a coordinated response built on the four strategic pillars identified in the Call to Action: improved data collection, empowering local action, evidence-based interventions, and institutionalised information exchange. The strengthened mandate of the EUDA, with its enhanced capabilities to anticipate future challenges, issue real-time alerts, facilitate knowledge exchange and promote evidence-informed responses, provides a unique opportunity to act decisively and improve Europe's ability to address this urgent threat.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Teodora Groshkova: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Alexander Söderholm:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Marieke Liem:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Kim Moeller:** Writing – review &

editing, Writing – original draft. **Seán Redmond**: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Paul Griffiths**: Writing – review & editing. **Karin Svanberg**: Writing – review & editing. **Célia Bobet**: Writing – review & editing. **Liesbeth Vandam**: Writing – review & editing. **Marica Ferri**: Writing – review & editing. **Andrew Cunningham**: Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

I am writing on behalf of my co-authors to disclose potential conflicts of interest related to our manuscript titled “Breaking the cycle: addressing the evolving dynamic of violence associated with the European drug market” submitted as a viewpoint to the special issue of the *International Journal of Drug Policy* on drug-related violence. In accordance with the journal's requirements, I wish to ensure full transparency and integrity in our submission.

We have no direct financial interests or connections, or other situations, that might raise the question of bias in the work reported or the views stated. However, we wish to disclose the following: given their roles as Guest Editors of the Special Issue on drug-related violence, Prof. Marieke Liem and Prof. Kim Moeller had no involvement in the peer review of this article and had no access to information regarding its peer review.

We are committed to upholding the highest ethical standards and believe that disclosing any potential conflicts is a crucial step in maintaining the integrity of scientific publishing.

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