

# Summary

Violent crime is one of the key subjects of discussion in the Netherlands. An important part of this discourse concerns the possession and use of firearms. In the opinion of the general public, the possession and use of firearms among criminal elements has increased during the recent past and so have the odds of becoming a victim of a crime involving a firearm. Question is whether these feelings are based upon a factual increase of the amount of offenses in which a firearm has been used. Hence the Dutch ministry of justice has commissioned a research to answer the following questions.:

- On how many occasions were illegal firearms used to commit crimes during the years 1998 – 2000?
- How many firearms are illegally possessed in the Netherlands?
- How many firearms are sold on the illegal market annually?
- What are the characteristics of perpetrators who use, possess and trade illegal firearms?

The information in this report is based on a number of sources. First the registration of the Dutch police was used to gather information about the number of confiscated illegal firearms and information about criminal acts in which firearms were used. Secondly, persons who are convicted in relation to the possession of illegal firearms were interviewed, and interviews were also held with officials from the Dutch police, the Dutch customs, Europol, Interpol as well as from other relevant institutions. Thirdly publications regarding illegal firearms (possession, use and trading) were analysed.

## **The use of illegal firearms in criminal acts**

The first question to be answered by this research is to what amount firearms were used to commit criminal acts, during the years 1998 - 2000. General findings are that, in the Netherlands as a whole, an estimated number of 4.881 incidents involving a firearm took place in 1998. In 1999 an estimated number of 5.155 incidents took place and in 2000 the number of incidents is 4.617. Per 100.000

inhabitants, an average of 30 incidents involving a firearm took place in the year 2000. The police region Amsterdam-Amstelland registered the largest number of incidents (72/100.000).

The types of firearms most commonly used to commit criminal acts, are pistols and revolvers. Firearms are usually used to commit robbery (38% of all criminal acts registered). In about 80 percent of the cases the use of the firearm is limited to the threatening of the victim.

### **Possession of illegal firearms**

In order to estimate the amount to which firearms are illegally possessed in the Netherlands, the seizure of illegal firearms by the Dutch police was used as a starting point. The number of illegal firearms seized by the Dutch police gradually increases from 992 in the year 1995 to 2.576 in the year 1999. However, in the year 2000 the number of seizures decreases to 2.463. An average of 16 firearms per 100.000 inhabitants were seized in the year 2000. Most illegal firearms were registered in the police-region Amsterdam-Amstelland (58) and Rotterdam-Rijnmond (34). However, the quality of the registration of seizures of illegal firearms by the Dutch police differs considerably between police-regions. The registration of seized firearms can be regarded upon as adequate in only 6 out of 25 police-regions. To make a reliable estimation of the extent of illegal used firearms, the amount seized by the police was used as index. Based on an analysis by the Dutch police it was assumed that about 10 percent of all firearms that are illegally possessed have been confiscated by the police. Based on this assumption, it is estimated that the total amount of weapons that are held in illegal possession in the Netherlands ranges from 85.000 to 125.000.

### **Trading of illegal firearms**

Firearms can be distinguished into several types. Apart from actual firearms, illegal possession also concerns blank-firing weapons (or arms that can fire gas-cartridges), and non-firing imitations of actual firearms. Both blank-firing weapons and imitations cannot be used to fire bullets, but they are suitable for threatening. Possession of these types of firearms is not permitted in the Netherlands. However, blank-firing weapons can be legally bought in a number of European countries, for instance Germany and Belgium. Blank-firing weapons that were seized in the Netherlands were usually bought in the countries mentioned. Imitations of firearms are generally bought during holidays, mainly in Spain and Turkey. Trading of illegal firearms is thus restricted to actual firearms. Based upon the number of firearms which are annually seized by the Dutch police, it is estimated that 20.000 – 25.000 illegal firearms are sold. This figure does not include blank-firing weapons and imitations of firearms.

### **Characteristics of perpetrators**

Perpetrators who are found in possession of an illegal firearm, mostly are male (95%). The average age is 24 years. Of the persons apprehended, about 20 percent have been arrested before, regarding an offence involving a firearm. Ethnic minorities are disproportionately engaged in firearms offences. This considers especially those who were born in the Dutch West-Indies (mainly Curaçao). Most suspects who have been arrested with regard to firearms offences were involved in other criminal activities as well. 40 percent of the suspects were also involved in the production, trafficking or dealing of hard- or softdrugs. Another 40 percent of the persons apprehended were involved in predatory crime (e.g. robberies, rip-offs). 15 percent of the firearms offences are related to domestic problems.