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The illegal use of hand grenades in the Netherlands

2008-2021

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Introduction: The Dutch Hand Grenade Violence Monitor

On September 14th 2021, a 30 year old man was sentenced to five years in prison for throwing a hand grenade into the backyard of a house in Almelo a year prior. In substantiating this sentence, the court wrote: ‘In determining the length of the sentence, the court also took into account that society has recently been regularly startled by the use of heavy weaponry such as a hand grenade. It is extremely worrying that certain groups apparently handle such weapons of war with ease and have no regard for the possible consequences’¹. Similar concerned sentiments about the illegal use of hand grenades in the Netherlands are voiced in the media, residents of affected neighborhoods as well as law enforcement officials. As a result of an increasing number of incidents and such public concern, the maximum sentence length for the use of a hand grenade was doubled to eight years in 2019².

Despite the fact that the issue of illegal hand grenades received ample public attention, a number of questions surrounding this phenomenon remain: For what kind of crimes are hand grenades used as weapons? What do we know about the victims and perpetrators of these incidents? Where do the hand grenades come from? Whilst anecdotal reports by the media have addressed some of these questions, there is still a vast scientific lacuna regarding this phenomenon. Therefore, in 2019, we launched the *Dutch Hand Grenade Monitor*, a database to track all incidents of illegal use of hand grenades in the Netherlands. Combining information from news articles, public trial documents and data from the Dutch National Police, we gathered information on the characteristics of these incidents, victims, perpetrators and possible connections to other crimes. In this report, we present the most relevant findings on the illegal use of hand grenades in the Netherlands from January 2008 to August 2021.

¹ ELCI:NL:RBOVE:2021:3534, original in Dutch

² ANP. (2019, 16 May). Celstraf voor gebruik handgranaten wordt verdubbelt.

<https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/celstraf-voor-gebruik-handgranaten-wordt-verdubbeld~b24249c4/>

Methodology

Data on incidents of illegal use of hand grenades in the Netherlands in the period 2008-2021 were collected through a structured analysis of Dutch national, regional, and local newspapers. Written media has proven to be a valuable source of data for the estimation of numerous (rare) criminal offences, including homicide followed by suicide³, internet-related murders⁴, (illegal) use of firearms⁵ and crimes that usually cause great social unrest⁶. In addition, recent reports show that cases of illegal use of hand grenades often receive extensive attention from the news media⁷.

For the purpose of this study, we collected newspaper articles through the search engine LexisNexis Academic, an electronic database of national, regional, and local print media. For this study, we aimed to find relevant news on recent incidents of illegal use of hand grenades, excluding seizures or discoveries of hand grenades dating back to the Second World War.

Incidents were included in a comprehensive dataset entitled the *Dutch Hand Grenade Monitor* if they occurred between 1 January 2008 and 30 August 2021, when it was reported by national and/or regional and/or local newspapers, and when they met our inclusion criteria, namely whether they had a suspected criminal, lethal or non-lethal use of a hand grenade. Incidents were excluded when (a) there was an apparent non-criminal motive, such as accidentally found hand grenades from World War II; (b) the hand grenades were considered counterfeits (for example, fake grenades used for reenactments or flash grenades used by the police); (c) incidents took place outside the Netherlands; (d) the incident did not involve a grenade, but rather other types of explosives (bombs, fireworks).

³ Aderibigbe, Y. A. (1997). Violence in America: a survey of suicide linked to homicides. *Journal of Forensic Science*, 42(4), 662-665; Danson, L., & Soothill, K. (1996). Murder followed by suicide: a study of the reporting of murder followed by suicide in The Times 1887–1990. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, 7(2), 310-322; Liem, M. C. A. (2010). *Homicide followed by suicide: An empirical analysis*. Utrecht University; Liem, M. C. A., & Koenraadt, F. (2007). Homicide-suicide in the Netherlands: A study of newspaper reports, 1992–2005. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 18(4), 482-493.

⁴ Liem, M. C. A., & Geelen, M. E. F. (2019). The interface between homicide and the Internet. A classification. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 48, 65-71; Yardley, E., & Wilson, D. (2015). Making Sense of 'Facebook Murder'? Social Networking Sites and Contemporary Homicide. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 54(2), 109-134.

⁵ Archer, P. J., Mallonee, S., Schmidt, A. C., & Ikeda, R. M. (1998). Oklahoma firearm-related injury surveillance. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 15(3), 83-91.; Barker, T., & Human, K. M. (2009). Crimes of the big four motorcycle gangs. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 37(2), 174-179.

⁶ Nash, B. P. (2004). Kids shooting kids: an analysis of newspaper accounts of unintentional shootings of Utah children, 1988–2003. *Gun Violence Prevention Center of Utah*.

⁷ For example; Jansen, E.J. (2021, September 14). Vijf jaar cel voor aanslag met handgranaat op woning in Almelo. Tubantia. <https://www.tubantia.nl/almelo/vijf-jaar-cel-voor-aanslag-met-handgranaat-op-woning-in-almelo~af25c8a2/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>; RTL Nieuws. (2021, July 6). Politie toont beelden van fietser Breda ie handgranaat plaatst bij bakkerij. <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5240255/opsporing-verzocht-handgranaat-breda-bakkerij>

Since 2018, the Dutch National Police, and in particular the Firearms Violence Coordinator, is recording seizures of and incidents with hand grenades in a so-called *Firearm Dashboard*. After receiving formal permission from the National Prosecution Office to access the dashboard, we validated and complemented information on incidents since 2018, found via the systematic search of news reports. Finally, we consulted public judicial decisions for correct and complete registration of the incidents.

After removing all duplicates and applying our inclusion criteria, a total of 185 unique hand grenade incidents from 2008 to august 2021 were identified. For 6 of these cases (3,2%), no validation across sources was possible, as they were only registered with the Dutch National Police, yet not reported in the news. There were no incidents reported in the media that couldn't be verified by police data. Each of the 185 cases was coded and processed using the statistical program SPSS (version 27.0).

Operationalizations

In order to perform a systematic analysis of all N incidents, we recorded 35 unique characteristics of each incident, using a coding manual developed for the purpose of this study.⁸ To map the scope of incidents and to perform a spatial-temporal analysis, we registered the locations of crimes, in particular the province, municipality, and specific place where the individual incidents took place. To distinguish between urban and non-urban areas, we used the definition of the Central Bureau of Statistics, which is based on the density of addresses in a particular area. Categories range from “very highly urban” to “non-urban”⁹. The variables “year”, “month”, and “day” provide information on the time when the crimes took place. We made a further distinction between “morning” (06.00-12.00), “afternoon” (12.00-18.00), “evening” (18.00-0.00) and night (0.00-6.00).

The nature of the target is categorized into “object” or “individual victim”, with the objects further broken down into private homes of suspects or victims, shops, restaurants or similar places of entertainment, public locations, and companies. The definition of “victim” deserves special attention: while in our data registration we make a clear difference between attacks against objects (such as bars) and attacks against people, the boundaries between these two categories are not always clear. For example, there are reports of hand grenades found in front of a house, but with specific indications that the grenade was meant as a direct threat against one of the residents of the house. When these

⁸ The coding manual can be found open access on the website of Leiden University: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/governance-and-global-affairs/isga/dhgm---coding-manual-marieke-liem.pdf>

⁹ Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2021). Stedelijkheid. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2019/44/meeste-afval-per-inwoner-in-minst-stedelijke-gemeenten/stedelijkheid>, very highly urban = >2500 addresses within 1 km², highly urban = 1500-2500 addresses within 1 km², somewhat urban = 1000-1500 addresses within 1 km², low urban = 500-1000 addresses within 1 km², non-urban = <500 addresses within 1 km²

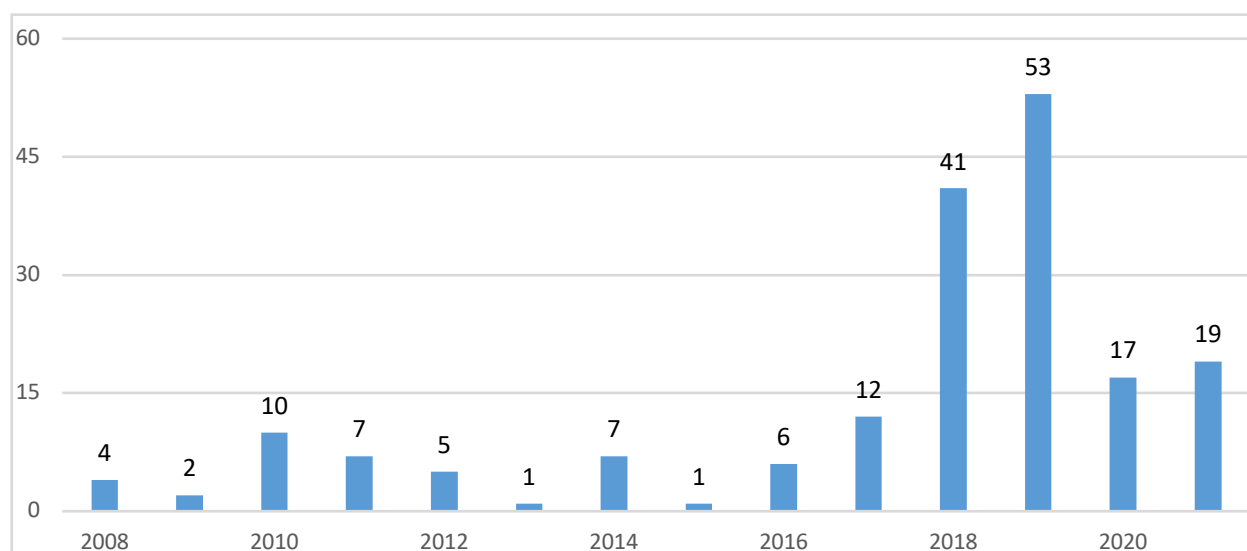
indications were present, for example when a resident was known to be an active criminal, we classified the incidents as an attack on a person.

Finally, we gathered public data from news articles or public court documents for connections with previous crimes based on (a) the suspect(s) or (b) the locations.

Prevalence of illegal use of hand grenades

In the period between January 2008 and September 2021, we registered 185 incidents of illegal uses of hand grenades. A closer look at the annual changes (see Figure 1) reveals a sharp increase of incidents since 2017. The peak of the illegal usage of hand grenades in the timeframe under study took place in 2019, with 53 separate incidents. As such, half of all incidents (50,8%) between 2008 and September 2021 took place only in 2018 and 2019.

Figure 1: Number of registered incidents of illegal use of hand grenades in the Netherlands, 2008 – September 2021



Source: Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor, Leiden University

Of particular interest is the sharp decrease of incidents after 2019. Although empirical evidence regarding a cause for the decline to 17 incidents in 2020 is missing, there are a few factors that potentially impacted a further increase: First, Covid-19 related policies, such as the curfew starting in

March 2020, have largely regulated public life, including public types of crimes¹⁰. For example, shops, bars and other places of amusements have been closed for parts of the year, and both potential victims and perpetrators have spent more time inside their homes. This dynamic seemed to have had a negative impact on the annual numbers of other crimes, such as robberies, burglaries, and theft, according to statistics of registered crimes by the Dutch National Police¹¹. Policies, such as the night-curfew, might have increased the risk of detection for perpetrators. Furthermore, we can hypothesize that restrictions regarding travel across borders might have impacted the amount of hand grenades smuggled into the Netherlands.

Although most restrictions of public life have been lifted since springtime 2021, the number of incidents recorded in 2021 until the end of September (N=19) is still significantly lower compared to 2018 or 2019, yet already surpassing the annual number of incidents of 2020 (see Figure 1).

Examining all incidents since 2008, no seasonal trends could be discovered. Incidents were spread more or less equally across the months of the year. Similarly, there is no clear pattern in the day of the week in which the incidents take place. Yet, it is evident from the data that perpetrators using hand grenades prefer to work during the dark hours: almost 60 percent (N=81) of all cases for which a time could be determined took place between midnight and six o'clock in the morning.

Altogether, in around 31 percent (N=57) of all incidents covered in this study, the hand grenade detonated by the hand of the perpetrator. Fortunately, none of these detonations caused lethal injuries since 2008, yet a total of seven individuals were injured, e.g., from grenade fragments or glass splinters flying around as a result of the detonation.

¹⁰ Nivette, A.E. et al. (2021). A global analysis of the impact of COVID-19 stay-at-home restriction on crime. *Nature Human Behavior*, 5, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01139-z>

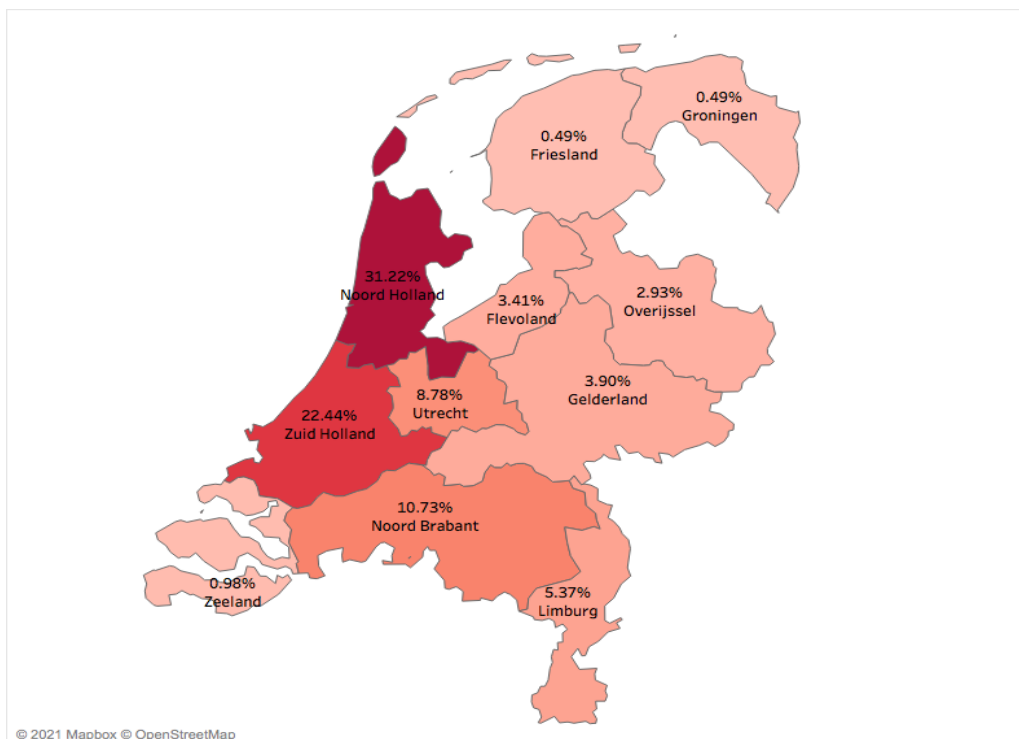
¹¹ Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2021). Geregistreeerde criminaliteit; soort misdrijf, regio. <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/83648NED/table?fromstatweb>; Thijssen, W. (2021, March 1). Gunstig neveneffect van corona: misdaadcijfers dalen fors. *Volkskrant*. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/gunstig-neveneffect-van-corona-misdaadcijfers-dalen-fors~bd37109d/>

Spatial aspects of illegal use of hand grenades

In the Netherlands, our data showed that the use of hand grenades is spatially concentrated within urban areas. 81 percent of the cases (N= 210) occurred in very strongly or strongly urban areas. On the contrary, areas with low levels of urbanity and rural areas account for less than 8 percent of all incidents of illegal use of hand grenades.

On the regional level, North-Holland records most of the cases (30.5 percent, N= 64), followed by South-Holland (21.9 percent, N= 46), and to a lesser extent North Brabant (11. 9 percent, N=25) and Utrecht (8.6 percent, N=18) (see Figure 2). On the other hand, Friesland and Groningen are the provinces with the lowest number of incidents between 2008 and September 2021, both with only one case.

Figure 2: Map of relative distribution of cases of illegal use of hand grenades on the regional level in the Netherlands, January 2008 – September 2021.



Source: Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor, Leiden University

On the municipal level, more than 50 percent of all 185 cases occurred in only ten (out of 352 total, as of 1 January 2021) municipalities (see Figure 3). Among these, Amsterdam is the city with the highest

number of cases (22.9 percent, N= 48) followed by Den Haag and Rotterdam (both 6.2 percent; N=13) and Utrecht (3.3 percent, N= 7). These four cities alone, also known as the G4, account for almost 40 percent of the total number of cases.

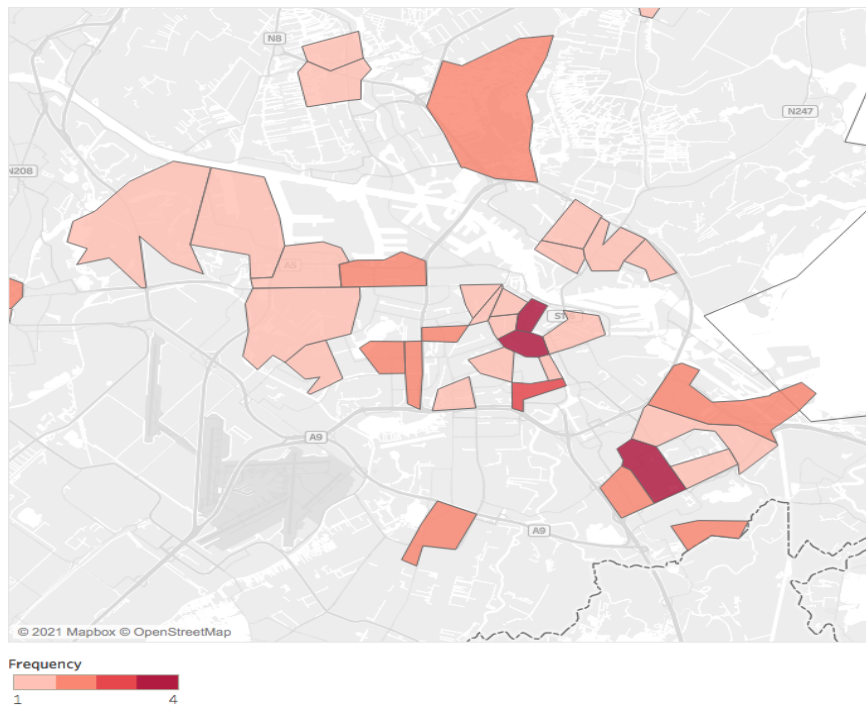
Figure 3: Map of distribution of cases of illegal use of hand grenades across municipalities in the Netherlands, 2008 – September 2021



Source: Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor, Leiden University

A closer look at the municipalities further reveals that the illegal use of hand grenades appears to be clustered on an even smaller neighborhood level within the major cities. For example, in Amsterdam, most of the hand grenades have been found close to the city center and in Zuidoost (see Figure 4). Similar concentrations in neighborhoods can be found in Rotterdam and the Hague.

Figure 4: Map of incidents of illegal uses of hand grenades per zip code in Amsterdam, January 2008 – September 2021.

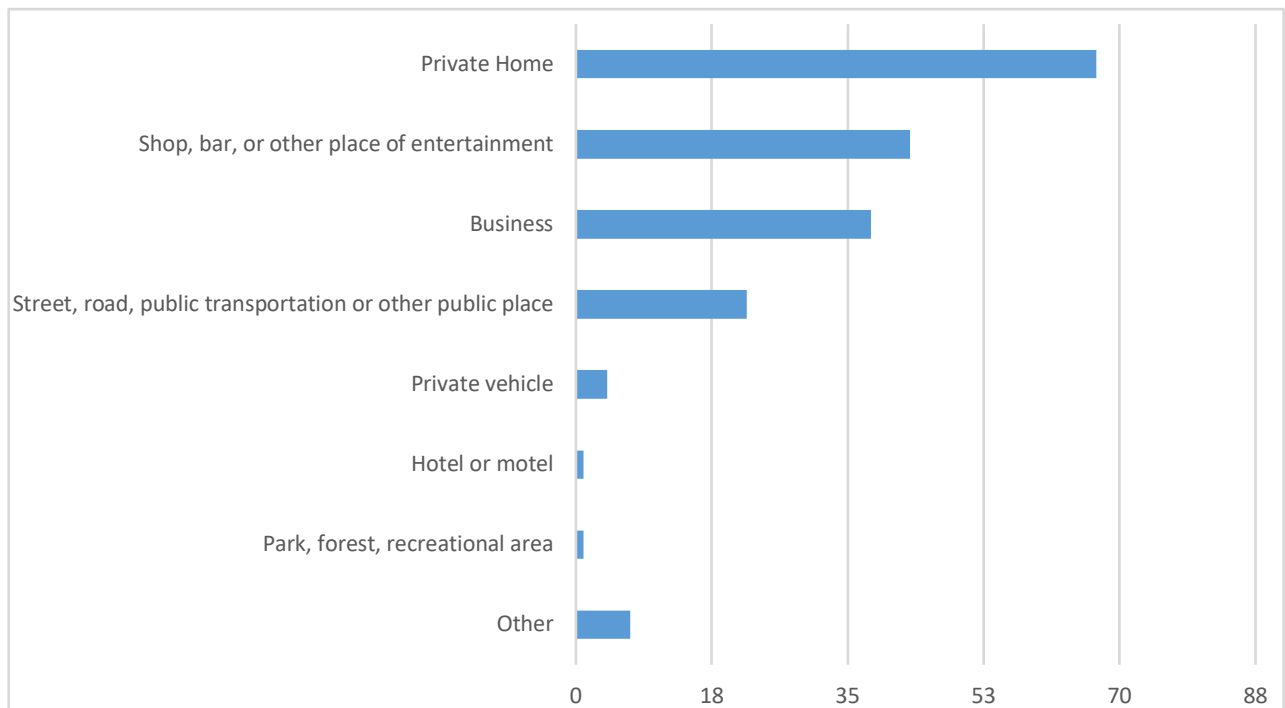


Source: Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor, Leiden University

What stands out further is that particular addresses (houses, bars, shops or other types of locations) have been targeted several times in a short amount of time. Out of 167 cases of illegal use of hand grenades where the exact address could be determined, 21 percent (N=37) were targeted more than once, and some (N=24) twice in less than a week. Furthermore, some of these addresses have not just been targeted with hand grenades, but also with firearms. It is not uncommon that perpetrators shot at an object before leaving a hand grenade or following up on a hand grenade with a shooting a few days later.

Most incidents took place around private homes (36,6 percent, N=67), followed by shops, restaurants, bars and similar places of entertainment (23,5 percent, N=43), and businesses (20,8 percent, N=38) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Type of locations of illegal use of hand grenades in the Netherlands, January 2008 – September 2021.



Source: Dutch Firearm Violence Monitor, Leiden University

Targets of illegal use of hand grenades

In 24 incidents (12,9 percent), an individual was directly targeted, e.g. when the perpetrator threw the hand grenade in the direction of the individual. However, in the majority of cases (N=142, 76 percent) included in the Dutch Hand Grenade Monitor, an object was the primary target, meaning that the perpetrator left the hand grenade without a human target in direct surroundings. Still, we can assume that incidents with objects as targets still contain a human victim: in many incidents, perpetrators hung or placed a hand grenade in front of the door of a house, a bar or under a car not to cause material damage, but to convey a message of threat or to extort individuals connected to these objects.

Relatively little is known about the targeted individuals behind the incidents involving hand grenades, possibly due to reasons of privacy which prevent media to report on them. Based on incidental reporting we can connect some targets to the criminal milieu or at least to a criminal past. In 2019, for example, police found two hand grenades close to houses owned by members of the motorcycle club Bandidos, which has been connected to various crimes in the past.¹² In other incidents,

¹² Trepels, L. (2019, January 22). Handgranaten gevonden bij Bandidos-leden. 1Limburg.
<https://www.1limburg.nl/blog-handgranaten-gevonden-bij-bandidos-leden>

targets have been extorted with hand grenades for financial reasons. Some incidents with hand grenades might also be connected to rivalries between (legal and illegal) businesses.

Perpetrators of illegal use of hand grenades

Information regarding the perpetrators is as sparse as details about the victims. This is partially due to privacy issues, as well as a high percentage of unsolved cases involving hand grenades. According to our available sources captured in the Dutch Hand Grenade Monitor, only for a little under one third (32,1 percent, N=59) of all cases between 2008 and September 2021 could at least one perpetrator be identified. Said percentage has further decreased with the increase of the number of incidents (2016: 50 percent solved of six incidents; 2018: 22 percent solved of 41 incidents; 2020: 18,8 percent solved of 16 incidents).

The little available information on perpetrators can be derived from CCTV footage published by law enforcement or public court records of trials. From these sources, we can derive that most perpetrators executed their crimes alone (54,5 percent, N=42 incidents) or in pairs (27,3 percent, N=21). However, there are a few incidents with up to seven perpetrators, which include not only the perpetrators executing the crime, but also individuals involved in the preparation or responsible for the idea of using an illegal hand grenade. Without exceptions, all known perpetrators of incidents with illegal use of hand grenades (N=74) are men. Their ages range from 17 to 74, with a little less than 40 percent (N=21) of known perpetrators being younger than 30 years old.

Illegal use of hand grenades in Europe

The illegal use of hand grenades in a non-conflict context is not a widespread phenomenon in Europe. More specifically, only Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands have made reports of a somewhat structural occurrence of such incidents.

Sweden

In Sweden, several explosions have attracted the attention of the national, as well as international media, as well as law enforcements in the past few years. The Swedish National Council on Crime Prevention reported 257 separate incidents with explosives for 2019 (involving also attempts and

preparations), which is a 59 percent increase to the 162 incidents reported in 2018¹³. In September 2021, a woman and two small children were almost killed when a hand grenade was thrown into the living room where they were sleeping. The woman suffered injuries¹⁴. National statistics regarding the types of explosives are not public. According to data gathered by the local police unit in Stockholm, around 35 percent of explosions registered in the area are attributable to hand grenades. Between 2017 and 2021, 71 hand grenades were seized by police and 51 hand grenades detonated¹⁵. In those detonations, three individuals were injured and one killed: In 2018, a 60 year old man died when he picked up a hand grenade he found on the street¹⁶. Similarly, to the Netherlands, police authorities registered a sudden peak in the illegal use of hand grenades. In 2015, only three separate detonations with hand grenades occurred, followed by a strong increase to 17, 12 and 15 explosions in the following three years (see figure 6). Since 2019, Stockholm police authorities registered on average nine detonations of hand grenade each year¹⁷. Of particular interest in the case of Sweden are other improvised explosive devices (IEDs): where the number of detonations with hand grenades has slightly decreased since 2019, explosions of IEDs have increased. Similar developments have not (yet) been registered in the Netherlands.

Figure 6: Detonations of hand grenades in Stockholm Region, 2011 to 2021

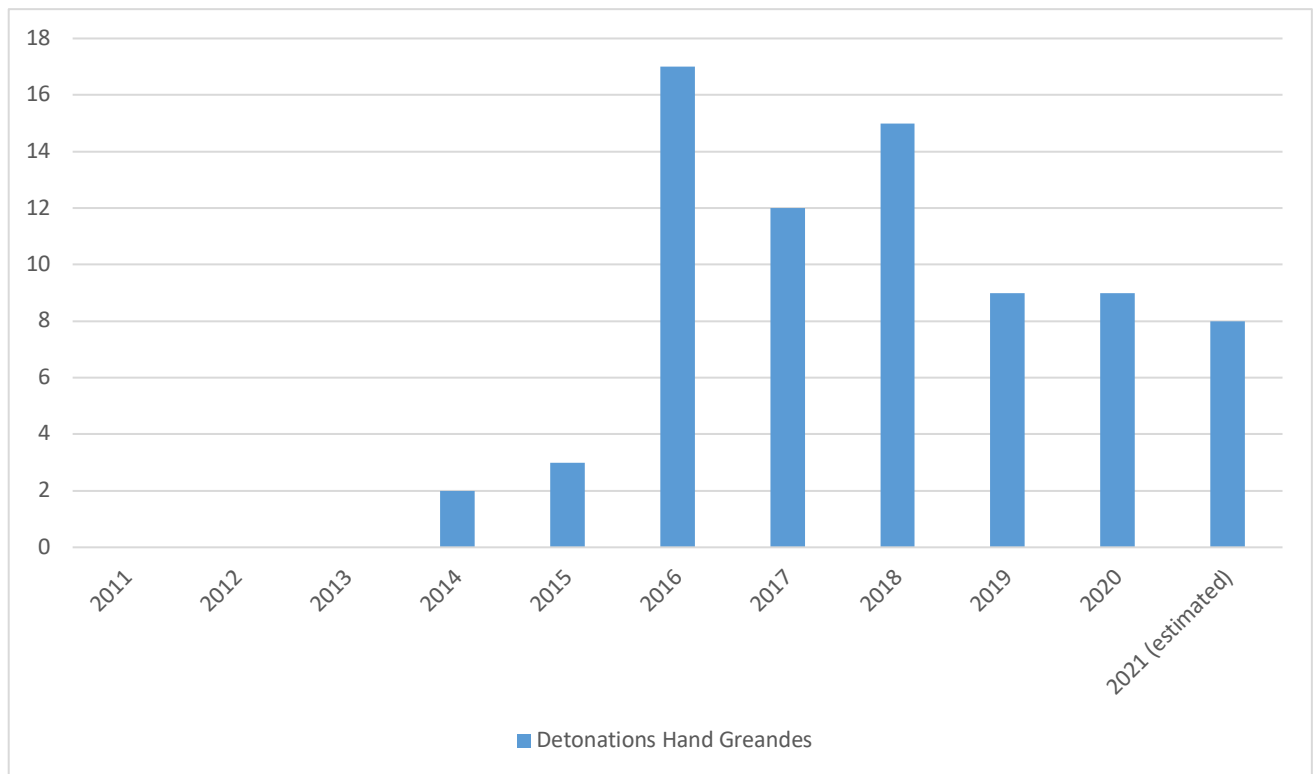
¹³ Swedish National Council on Crime Prevention. (2020, January 29). Sprängningarna ökar. <https://www.bra.se/om-bra/nytt-fran-bra/arkiv/nyheter/2020-01-29-sprangningarna-okar.html>

¹⁴ Soxbo, S. & Ekström, K. (2021, September 20). Uppgifter: Barn låg och sov när handgranat kastades in. Expressen. <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/explosion-vid-bostad-i-sollentuna-en-skadad/>

¹⁵ Sturup, J. *The use of hand grenades in urban Sweden with special reference to the Stockholm region*. Expert meeting on hand grenades at Leiden University in Hague 2021-10-08.

¹⁶ BBC. (2018, January 7). Stockholm station blast: Man dies in hand grenade explosion. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42597802>

¹⁷ Sturup, J. *The use of hand grenades in urban Sweden with special reference to the Stockholm region*. Expert meeting on hand grenades at Leiden University in Hague 2021-10-08.



Source: Joakim Sturup, Swedish Police, Stockholm Region¹⁸

Similarly to the Netherlands, attacks with hand grenades are seldomly directed against individual persons, but rather businesses, private homes or vehicles with the goal to threaten or for extortion. Almost 80 percent of explosions (hand grenades and other explosives) occurred in these places¹⁹. Furthermore, many of said explosions can be connected to other criminal activities, and conflicts between criminal groups and gangs that not only attack each other with explosives, but also shootings. It comes to no surprise then those shootings and detonations occur in the same local areas in Stockholm, as well as other larger cities in Sweden, mainly Gothenburg and Malmo.²⁰ A major discrepancy with the Dutch context of illegal use of hand grenades is the detonation rate which is – with around 80 percent – significantly higher in Sweden than in the Netherlands (30 percent).

Belgium

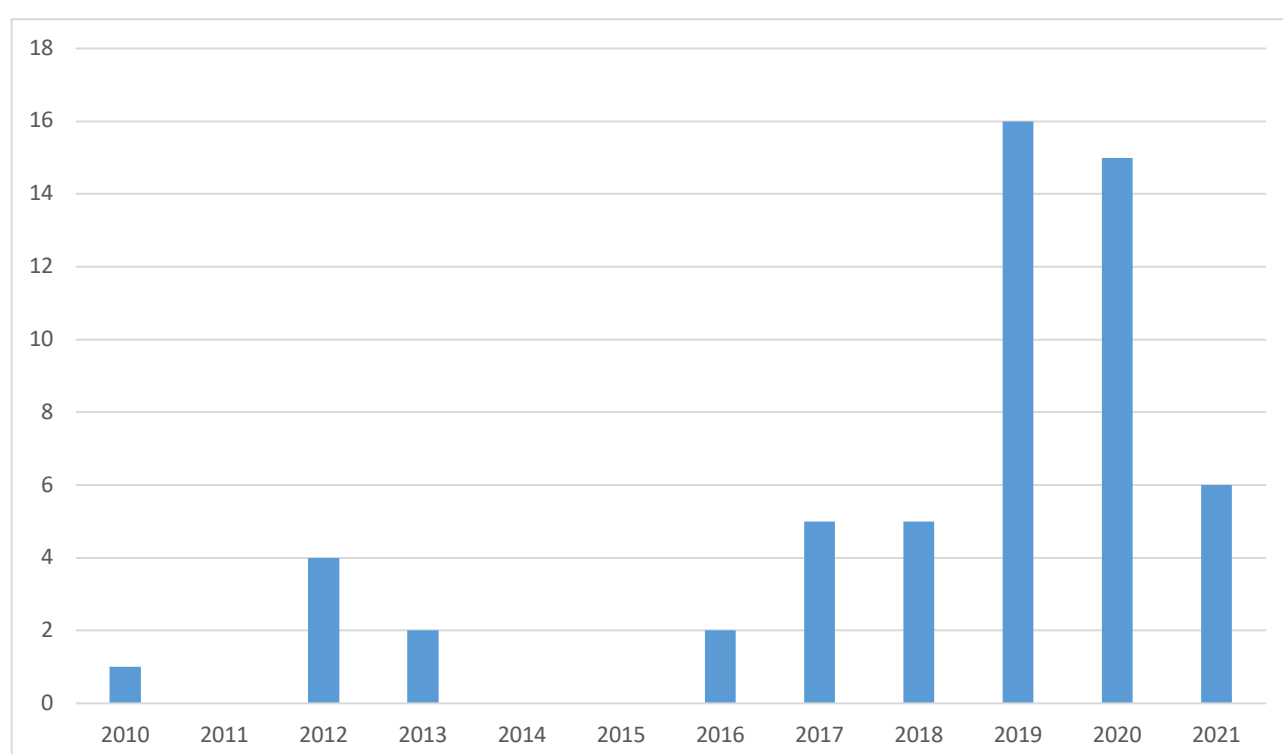
¹⁸ Sturup, J. *The use of hand grenades in urban Sweden with special reference to the Stockholm region*. Expert meeting on hand grenades at Leiden University in Hague 2021-10-08.

¹⁹ Sturup, J. *The use of hand grenades in urban Sweden with special reference to the Stockholm region*. Expert meeting on hand grenades at Leiden University in Hague 2021-10-08.

²⁰ Sturup, J., Gerell, M., & Rostami, A. (2020). Explosive violence: A near-repeat study of hand grenade detonations and shootings in urban Sweden. *European journal of criminology*, 17(5), 661-677.

In Belgium, the Flemish Peace Institute is the first institution to gather information regarding the illegal use of hand grenades for the region of Flanders and Brussels. Based on media analysis as well as statements from law enforcement agents, they register a total of 56 incidents between 2010 and September 2021. Furthermore, the data reveal a similar sudden increase of incidents as in Sweden and the Netherlands (see figure 7). Only five separate incidents were registered in 2017 and 2018 each, followed by 16 and 15 incidents the two years after. In 2021, six incidents occurred until the end of September.

Figure 7: Incidents of illegal use of hand grenades in Flanders and Brussels region in Belgium, 2010 – September 2021



Source: Flemish Peace Institute²¹

Similar to the Netherlands and Sweden, the phenomenon of hand grenades being used in criminal activities is spatially concentrated, mainly in Antwerp City and surrounding districts, as well as a few cases in Brussels.

In around 80 percent of the incidents, an object was the target of perpetrators who left behind a hand grenade. Only in one single case since 2010 did a perpetrator actively threaten another human

²¹ Flemish Peace Institute (2021). Belgian Hand Grenades Monitor

with a grenade (although the grenade was later determined to be fake)²². Similar to the Netherlands, private homes, businesses, bars and restaurants, as well as vehicle are common crime scenes.

Although detailed data regarding the context of attacks with hand grenades are missing, some of these incidents could be linked to other, mostly drug-related criminogenic activities. For example, in 2021, police arrested twelve suspects linked to several attacks with hand grenades in the context of the Sky ECC decryption earlier that year²³. The attacks could be connected to conflicts between criminal groups active in drug-trafficking and possibly other crimes. Another indication that hand grenades are used as a tool within the criminal milieu is that some incidents seem connected with shootings²⁴. Similar to Sweden, hand grenade attacks in Belgium often end in a detonation: around 70 percent of the hand grenades in Flanders and Brussels exploded, as opposed to 12 percent that did not. In the remaining 18 percent of incidents, perpetrators used either a fake hand grenade, or no information about the grenade was available to the researchers.

²² Sudinfo (2017, January 16). Schaerbeek: un homme entre dans un snack armé d'une grenade. Sudinfo. <https://www.sudinfo.be/art/1764519/article/2017-01-16/schaerbeek-un-homme-entre-dans-un-snack-arme-d-une-grenade>

RDB (2017, January 17) Man met granaat in snackbar opgepakt. Het Nieuwsblad. https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20170116_02677114

²³ Lefelon, P. (2021, April 8). Operatie Sky: Twaalf verdachten van granaataanslagen in drugsmilieu opgepakt. PZC. <https://www.pzc.nl/antwerpen/operatie-sky-twaalf-verdachten-van-granaataanslagen-in-drugsmilieu-opgepakt~af6148a6/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

²⁴ Paelinck, G. & Verschuyft, A. (2020, August 25). Voorbijganger vindt intacte granaat op straat in Deurne, afgelopen nacht ook al huis beschoten. VRT. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/08/25/na-granaataanslag-gisteren-vannacht-huis-beschoten-in-de-de-gry/>