

Gun Ownership in Belgium

Nils Duquet & Maarten Van Alstein

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1 Introduction

In the 1990s and 2000s, small arms and their proliferation emerged as a major issue in the international as well as in the domestic public policy sphere. The authorities in many countries made efforts to restrain civilian possession and encourage citizens to get rid of their guns, often in the wake of highly mediatized lethal incidents with firearms. At the same time, widespread frustration existed among practitioners and academics at the lack of knowledge about how many small arms existed and the lack of hard data on civilian firearms possession. In order to tackle this problematic state of affairs, in 2007 the Small Arms Survey published a first detailed assessment of the global distribution of factory-made civilian firearms. The Small Arms Survey estimated that worldwide, nearly 79 million of these were known to be registered with the authorities, while the number of firearms owned by civilians was estimated at approximately 650 million.

Frustration over a lack of hard data on civilian firearms possession can also be said to apply in the case of Belgium. This is not to say that no estimates exist. The Small Arms Survey itself estimated civilian firearms ownership in Belgium as between 1.500.000 and 2.100.000 arms (of which 870.000 were said to be registered), an average of 17,2 firearms per 100 people. These estimates were based on a press communiqué of the Council of Ministers of Belgium (December 2005) and on articles in the Belgian press.¹ Similar numbers also figured in the explanatory notes attached to the draft of a new Weapons Act which was tabled in the Belgian Federal Parliament in February 2006,² and in a note published by the *Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité* (GRIP) in Brussels in June 2006, in the wake of the introduction of the new Belgian Weapons Act.³ However, although the estimate of 1.500.000 to 2.000.000 weapons became commonly used and widely quoted⁴, it is not without its problems. Not least, the source and the method applied to arrive at this estimate remain unclear. Moreover, policy makers, stakeholders and the media do not consistently use this figure of 1.5 to 2 million guns. In some cases the figure is used to indicate the total number of guns (both legal and illegal), while in others it is quoted to refer to the number of illegal guns in circulation. Of course, because of their illegal nature, estimating the number of illegally held guns will always be a complicated exercise. In the course of a major research project undertaken by the Flemish Peace Institute on the trade, possession and use of firearms in Belgium, we were not able to find a satisfactory method, based on the available evidence, to calculate an estimate of the total number of privately owned guns in Belgium (legally *plus* illegally held firearms, the latter including firearms owned by criminals *and* guns irregularly held by citizens). The statistical information on which to base an adequate estimate is simply not available. For the moment, the reality is that nobody knows how many firearms are privately owned in Belgium.

This observation does not, however, imply that it is completely impossible to provide figures about the incidence of gun ownership in Belgium. In this paper we use two methods to map gun ownership in Belgium. First we turn to registered gun possession. The Belgian 'Central Weapons Register' and the databases of provincial weapons administrations make it possible to provide figures relating to the number of registered gun owners, the number of registered guns, the number of guns that have been handed in or regularized during the amnesty and regularization campaigns following the introduction of the new Weapons Act, and the number of stolen and lost guns. Second, we use the results of telephone surveys to gain a view of the profile and historical evolution of gun ownership in Belgium, and to examine Belgian rates of gun ownership in a European perspective. By combining these two methods, we are able not only to offer informed

data on rates of gun possession in Belgium, but also to point to indications that private gun ownership in Belgium is declining.

2 Registered gun ownership

The Central Weapons Register (CWR) is a computerised data-filing system in which data are stored on the ownership and transfers of guns, as well as on gun owners and authorized persons such as arms dealers and collectors.⁵ The register was established in 1989. Until then records were kept by local police forces, which were responsible for licensing most gun permits. Belgium is one of the few countries to have kept a national electronic register for so many years. The mere fact that this national database exists means that Belgium, unlike many of its neighbouring countries, has an important tool at its disposal to gain an insight into legal gun ownership. The 2008 revisions of the EEC Council Directive 91/477 on the control of the acquisition and possession of weapons stipulate that all member states must establish by 31 December 2014, and then maintain, a similar (centralised or decentralised) computerised data-filing system in which all firearms subject to the directive will be recorded. This filing system shall record, for not less than 20 years, each firearm's type, make, model, calibre and serial number, as well as the names and addresses of the supplier and the person acquiring or possessing the firearm.⁶ In the last years several member states have started establishing electronic firearms registers.⁷

In the two decades following its creation, the Belgian CWR has been plagued by various problems. In 2004 the Permanent Oversight Committee on the Police Services (Committee P) conducted an investigation into the CWR and its troubles. A sample study indicated that 21% of all legally acquired guns had not, or not yet, been recorded in the CWR. Moreover, 30% of all the records contained errors, relating to the description of the gun or to the personal details of the gun owner. As a consequence, Committee P was of the opinion that the CWR was unreliable and not useful as an operational or policy tool.⁸ Since then various attempts have been undertaken to correct errors in the records and optimize the input of data. In 2009-2012 a new software system was implemented. In spite of these attempts, as a result of years of neglect and problematic input of data, statistics based on the CWR need to be interpreted with due caution and reserve. Nonetheless, these statistics provide useful and interesting information about gun ownership in Belgium.

2.1 Registered gun owners

The Central Weapons Register records all persons who own one or more firearms subject to authorization or registration. Freely obtainable guns, such as antique weapons, are not subject to authorization or registration and are thus not recorded in the CWR. For every gun the register mentions whether the owner holds the gun on the basis of a licence for the possession of a firearm, a hunting permit, a target shooting license, or an authorization as collector. Table 1 gives an overview of the number of registered 'active' gun owners in the CWR at two different moments in time (October 2006 and March 2010). The table includes natural persons as well as legal persons.^a In interpreting these figures, due caution is warranted given the problematic history of backlogs

^a Natural persons are recorded in the CWR as type 11 and type 12 'identities', legal persons as type 22 'identities'. Type 11 are natural persons, ie citizens registered in the National Register. Type 12 identities are used for natural persons who are not listed in the National Register, such as embassy staff and SHAPE personnel. The CWR statistics show that Brussels and the Province of Hainaut, where SHAPE is located, account for the majority of all type 12 identities. The CWR is linked to the National Register, so that changes in the National Register such as a death or a move automatically entail changes to the CWR data (Interview with federal police officials, in charge of the administrative services of the CWR, Brussels, October 28th, 2009).

and errors in the input of data at the local police level and of management problems at central level (see above). These problems have taken their toll on the quality and reliability of the data in the CWR.^a

Table 1: Number of active gun owners in the Central Weapons Registry, by province and type of identity, 2006 and 2010

Province	2006		2010	
	Natural persons	Legal persons	Natural persons	Legal persons
Antwerp	42,748	119	44,592	124
Brussels	21,765	281	22,666	291
Hainaut	73,409	108	75,214	111
Limburg	27,584	64	29,180	77
Liège	47,700	159	49,717	173
Luxembourg	15,093	24	15,791	24
Namur	30,447	55	31,538	56
East Flanders	44,894	108	47,038	114
Flemish Brabant	37,479	67	38,764	73
Walloon Brabant	18,964	21	19,830	22
West Flanders	30,678	105	32,337	120
No mail code provided	1,798	34	1,210	0
Total	393,704		409,062	

Source: Federal Police, Central Weapons Registry (statistics for October 2006 and March 2010)

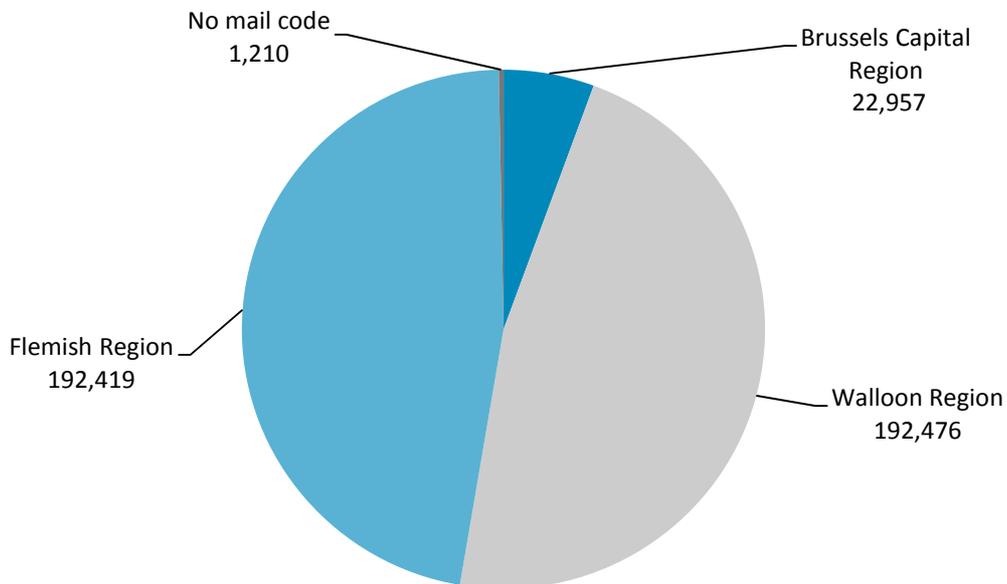
These statistics show that in 2010 almost 410,000 active gun owners were registered in the CWR. The vast majority of these gun owners are natural persons. Legal persons or entities owning guns, such as private security firms, are much less common. The group of registered 'active' gun owners can be subdivided into two groups. First there is the group of gun owners who hold their guns legally, either because they complied with the new legislation introduced in 2006 and did what was necessary to regularize their firearms, or because they legally acquired guns after 2006. In this group we also count the gun owners who recently died and whose guns had not yet been handed in or transferred at the time of drawing up these statistics. Secondly, the figures in table 1 also represent gun owners who did not regularize their guns according to the new law of 2006. These gun owners now hold their firearms illegally. In view of the fact that this last group of gun owners is included in these statistics, it is safe to say that there are currently fewer than 410,000 persons who have an authorization or licence to possess a firearm. Gun owners who are registered in the CWR as 'active' but who do not have the necessary authorizations or licences can, in principle, be tracked down by the police.

Table 1 indicates that the highest number of registered gun owners is found in the provinces of Hainaut, Liège, East Flanders and Antwerp. Gun ownership is lowest in the provinces of Luxembourg, Walloon Brabant and Brussels. A comparison of the figures for the Flemish and Walloon provinces shows that the number of gun owners is almost the same in Flanders as in Wallonia. Given the demographic differences between both parts of the country, this implies that

^a It is also important to bear in mind that an 'identity' (ID) is preserved for all persons who have ever been recorded in the database, even after their death, or after they have transferred all their guns or handed them in. In other words, persons who no longer actively possess a gun continue to be registered in the CWR, but they are recorded as 'passive' gun owners.^a The category of 'active' gun owners on the other hand includes all individuals who hold at least one gun in their possession.

the percentage of the population who are registered active gun owners is significantly higher in Wallonia than in Flanders: approximately 5.6% of the overall population in Wallonia are registered as gun owners, compared with 3.1% in Flanders and 2.2% in Brussels.

Figure 1: Number of active gun owners in the Central Weapons Registry in the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels capital region in 2010



Source: Federal Police, Central Weapons Registry (statistics March 2010). Own calculation.

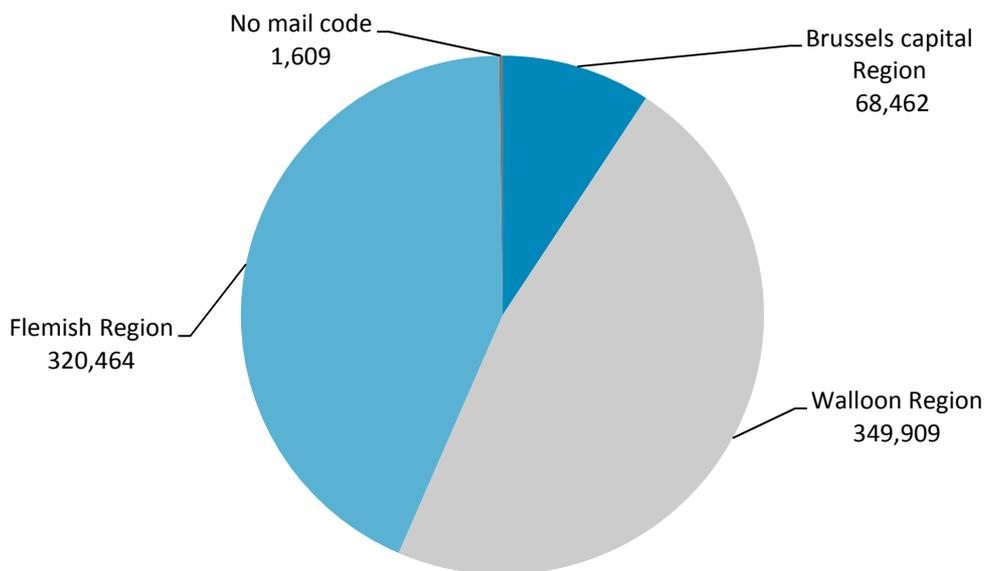
Interesting in table 1 is the noticeable increase in the number of registered active gun owners between October 2006 and March 2010. During this period the number of active gun owners in Belgium increased by 15,000, or 4%. It is not clear exactly how this increase came about, but we can formulate two possible reasons. The first relates to an unknown number of new gun owners, i.e. persons who legally acquired firearms after 2006. Secondly, the increase can be attributed in part to the group of gun owners who before the introduction of the new law owned their guns illegally but who obtained an authorization as a consequence of the amnesty campaign that accompanied the new legislation. To determine the sizes of these groups, further research is needed. We can conclude, however, that the recent increase in the number of registered active gun owners can be attributed in part to the inclusion in the CWR of previously unknown persons who held their weapons illegally.

2.2 Registered guns

Besides the number of gun owners, the Central Weapons Register also makes it possible to derive statistics on the number of registered guns. Of course, the same reservations apply vis-à-vis the reliability of CWR data with regard to these statistics as in the case of the number of gun owners (see above). Therefore the figures presented in this section must also be read and interpreted with due caution. In March 2010 almost 1.2 million guns were recorded in the CWR. Not all of these guns, however, were 'active'. In order to make it possible to trace the 'history' of guns, firearms

that were handed in, exported or reported as stolen retain a record in the CWR as a 'passive' gun. In March 2010, the CWR listed 740,444 'active' guns. This amounts to approximately 70 legal guns per 1000 Belgians. The figures are slightly higher in the Walloon region (349,909) than in the Flemish region (320,464). The Brussels capital region represents about 10% of all guns in Belgium (68,462) (figure 2). Thus we can deduce that on average the number of guns per person is higher in the Walloon region than in the Flemish region: 101 guns per 1000 inhabitants in the Walloon region, compared with 52 in the Flemish region and 64 in the Brussels capital region respectively. Given that the CWR in 2010 listed 409,062 active gun owners in Belgium, we can conclude that on average a registered gun owner in Belgium owns 1.8 guns.^a However, given that many sport shooters, hunters and collectors possess several guns, it is more probable that a significant number of gun owners only own one gun. In other words, there are two groups of gun owners in Belgium: a rather small group of gun owners owning several guns and a larger group of gun owners who only own one or two guns.

Figure 2: Number of active guns in the Central Weapons Register in Flemish, Walloon and Brussels capital region in 2010



Source: Federal Police, Central Weapons Registry (statistics March 2010). Own calculation.

Table 2 shows the numbers of active guns registered in the CWR in October 2006 and March 2010, per type of authorization or licence. These figures show that between 2006 and 2010 the number of registered active guns dropped by approximately 6% (from 787,858 to 740,444). While this decrease can be explained by the number of guns handed in during the large-scale collection campaigns that accompanied the introduction of the new law in 2006 (see below), the difference between these two figures does not give a precise indication of the number of legal guns that were handed in during the gun collection campaign. This is because between 2006 and 2010 a number

^a The average number of registered guns per owner is significantly higher in the Brussels capital region (2.98) compared with the Flemish region (1.67) and the Walloon region (1.82).

of guns were also newly registered in the CWR, either because they were newly purchased, or because they were regularized from illegal to legal during the amnesty campaign.

Table 2: Number of registered active guns in the Central Weapons Registry, October 2006 and March 2010

Type of licence/authorization	2006	2010
Authorized arms dealer	314	5
Authorized collector	13,671	22,118
Licensed 'defence gun'/'military firearm'	580,243	362,400
Transfer of 'hunting/sporting rifle'	187,471	95,274
Licensed 'found' gun	8	40
Confiscated gun	1	4
One-year licence under new Weapons Act ^a	71	857
Licence under new Weapons Act	202	104,893
Hunting permit	5,874	115,757
Target shooter's licence	3	27,000
Special hunting guard permit	-	461
Historic/folkloric events	-	289
Licence without ammunition	-	11,346
Total	787,858	740,444

Source: Federal Police, Central Weapons Registry (statistics for October 2006 and March 2010)

What stands out in table 2 is that guns are still recorded in the CWR under categories from the old Belgian Weapons Act of 1933 ('defence guns/military firearm' and 'hunting/sporting rifles') that no longer exist in the current control regime. There are two possible explanations for this. First, the provincial weapons administrations responsible for regularizing and handing out licences and authorizations are faced with serious administrative backlogs. A large number of the guns still recorded in the old categories have in fact been declared by their owners for regularization, but because of administrative backlogs have not yet received a new licence and consequently a listing in the CWR under the new categories (in the meantime, these guns are held legally by their owners because they duly applied for regularization). Secondly, not all owners who held their guns legally under the old Weapons Act (either because they had a licence for their weapons or did not need one in the first place) have handed in their guns or declared them for regularization. These guns, which are still recorded in the CWR, are now held illegally. As the provincial weapons administrations continue with the regularization process, we can expect the numbers of guns recorded in the old CWR categories to continue to drop. Once all the backlogs have been dealt with, only the guns that have not been submitted for regularization by their owners, or that in the past were incorrectly input to the CWR, will remain listed under these old categories. This implies that once the administrative backlogs have been dealt with, the CWR presents possibilities for tracking down illegal guns.

In conclusion, CWR statistics show that the number of legally owned guns in Belgium has decreased over recent years. On the one hand the figure of 740,444 can be said to be an overestimate of the

^a The transitional measures as outlined in the Weapons Act of 8 June 2006 stipulated that a temporary one-year licence could be granted for guns that became subject to an authorization as a consequence of the new law, but which had been purchased after January 1st, 2006 (see article 44, §2, 3rd section, Weapons Act). The legislator considered the period after January 1st, 2006 to be a risk period, because hunting rifles and sporting rifles (freely obtainable under the old law of 1933) might have been acquired during this period by individuals aware of the fact that a draft for a stricter law had been tabled in parliament.

number of registered firearms in Belgium, given the possible errors in the CWR and the fact that a number of registered guns have not been regularized by their owners. On the other hand, this figure is an underestimate of the total number of firearms in civilian hands in Belgium, given the significant 'hidden' number of non-registered guns (in legal and illegal possession).

2.3 Regularized and Collected guns

The new Belgian Weapons Act of 8 June 2006 stipulated that all guns that were held legally under the conditions of the old law of 1933 had to be regularized under the provisions of the new control regime. In the period from June 2006 to the end of October 2008, gun owners had various options for regularizing their weapons, depending on the category of weapon:

- renew old licences (e.g. for 'defence' guns and 'military firearms')
- apply for licences for guns that were freely obtainable under the old law ('sport and hunting guns')
- register guns held on the basis of a hunting permit or a sport shooters' license (for which the new law provided in a special regime)
- apply for a licence for passive gun ownership (i.e. without ammunition)
- hand in weapons that were held legally before 2006 but for which the owner could not obtain a permit under the new legislation
- obtain a licence for guns that previously were held illegally or hand them in (the introduction of the new law was accompanied by amnesty measures and large-scale gun collecting campaigns)

The question can be posed how many of the 787,858 guns that were registered in the CWR in 2006 were regularized or handed in by their owners, and how many of the registered guns became illegal in the wake of the introduction of the new law. Opponents and critics of the Weapons Act of 8 June 2006 have argued that the enforcement of the new act gave rise to an increase in illegal gun ownership. According to their argumentation, the new act was so strict that many gun owners chose not to declare their guns out of fear of not being allowed to keep them. In this section we attempt to gain insight into the number of guns that have been regularized or handed in following the enforcement of the new Weapons Act, and thus into the number of these guns that are now held illegally.

Statistics supplied by the Federal Justice Department show that 184,821 applications for the *renewal of old licences* were submitted to the provincial weapons administrations. An equivalent number of applications for renewal were submitted in the Walloon region and the Flemish region (table 3). One specific problem is that there are no statistics available on how many licences were issued between 2001 and 2006, which is important for our calculations, because these licences did not need to be renewed under the new law. Furthermore, there is no information about the number of applications for licences for weapons that were freely obtainable before the enforcement of the new Weapons Act (the 'hunting and sports weapons').

Table 3: Applications for the renewal of old gun licences 2006 – 2009

Region	Applications for the renewal of old licences
Flemish Region	84,701
Walloon Region	87,118
Brussels Capital Region	13,002
Total	184,821

Source: Weyts, B., written question 750 dated 9 July 2009 to the Minister of Justice, Session 2008-2009, QRVA 52 73, Chamber of Representatives, 17 August 2009

Statistics about *licences for passive gun ownership* can be drawn from the CWR (see table 2). The problem is that these figures only relate to licences which in 2010 had effectively been issued and registered in the CWR, but not to the licences that had been applied for but delayed in the administrative backlog. Table 4 provides an overview of the applications for licences for passive gun ownership. Although the available figures show blind spots (not all the provinces have provided statistics), table 4 shows that the number of applications filed in January 2009 exceeded the number of guns that were effectively registered in the CWR in March 2010 on a licence for passive gun ownership. This means that a large part of these applications still needed to be processed as of March 2010. This is also apparent in table 4: in every province for which figures are available, the number of applications still to be reviewed in 2009 was significantly higher than the number of applications already processed.

Table 4: Applications for licences for passive gun ownership, 2006-2008.

	Submitted applications	Approved applications	Denied applications	Applications that are still being examined
Antwerp	911	52	1	858
Brussels	1,874	305	19*	1,550
Hainaut	2,221	unknown	234**	1,987
Limburg	574	110	0	464
Liège***	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
Luxembourg***	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
Namur***	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
East Flanders	2,092	145	42	6,905 ^a
Flemish Brabant	911	88	0	823
Walloon Brabant***	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
West Flanders	4,268	1,549	12	2,719
Total	At least 12,851	At least 2,606	At least 308	

Source: Monfils, P., written question 4-2861 dated 22 January 2009 to the Minister of Justice, Senate

* ongoing procedures of denial because of danger to the public order, etc.

** applications that have been deemed inadmissible

*** the method of registration does not allow the provincial weapons administration to determine the number of applications for passive gun ownership

^a Of these 6,905 applications 1,132 were effectively being examined at the time when the weapons administrations calculated these statistics; 5,773 applications still had to be processed (see Monfils, P., written question 4-2861 dated 22 January 2009 to the Minister of Justice, Senate).

Importantly, in the framework of the *large-scale regularization and amnesty campaign*, gun owners could also opt for handing in their weapons. In all provinces, gun collecting campaigns were launched, and Table 5 gives an indication of the number of guns handed in during the collection campaigns of 2006-2008. We can infer from the collected figures that at least 198,000 guns were surrendered. The figures, however, are far from complete. Not only have not all provincial administrations systematically kept statistics of guns handed in, but the provinces that did register surrendered guns did not always use the same registration methods. Moreover, the figures vary depending on the source.^a This makes it difficult if not impossible to calculate the exact number of guns that were handed in after the introduction of the new Weapons Act is. Unfortunately, moreover, the available statistics do not distinguish between whether the collected guns were held legally or illegally under the old law.

Table 5: Collected guns according to the activity reports of the provincial governors, 2006-2008

Province	2006 report	2007 report	2008 report
Antwerp	14,221	5,738	4,053
Brussels	1,779	6,066	7,217
Hainaut	2,516	unknown	unknown
Limburg	6,504	13,019	1,395
Liège	3,620	More than 12,000	More than 2,000
Luxembourg	1,506	unknown	unknown
Namur	2,637	4,500	5,600
East Flanders	9,696	11,456*	1,142*
Flemish Brabant	11,311	17,710	18,876
Walloon Brabant	1,705	unknown	unknown
West Flanders	6,504	9,403	16,289
Total	more than 198,463 guns		

Source: Federal services of the governors, Activity reports for 2006, 2007 and 2008, Brussels: FPS Interior

* Figures obtained from the Provincial Weapons Administration of East Flanders

In conclusion, given the problematic nature of the available statistics, it is very difficult to gain a good insight into how many firearms were regularized and collected after the introduction of the new legislation. The available figures simply are not sufficiently reliable. As a result of the lack of good data it is difficult to determine what happened with the 787,858 guns that were registered in the CWR in October 2006. Based on the incomplete data, we only know that almost 185,000 applications for the renewals of old licences were submitted, as well as over 15,000 licences for passive gun ownership. There are no statistics available about the applications for licences for weapons that were freely available before the enforcement of the new Weapons Act, nor about how many licences (not requiring renewal) were issued between 2001 and 2006. As regards the number of guns that were effectively surrendered during the collection campaigns, we can only arrive at the rough estimate that more than 200.000 guns were handed in. This estimate is important because it indicates, at a minimum, how many guns were taken out of society in the wake of the law of 2006. Nevertheless, the figures on the gun collection campaigns tell us nothing about how many of these guns were legal and how many illegal. Based on the available statistics, it

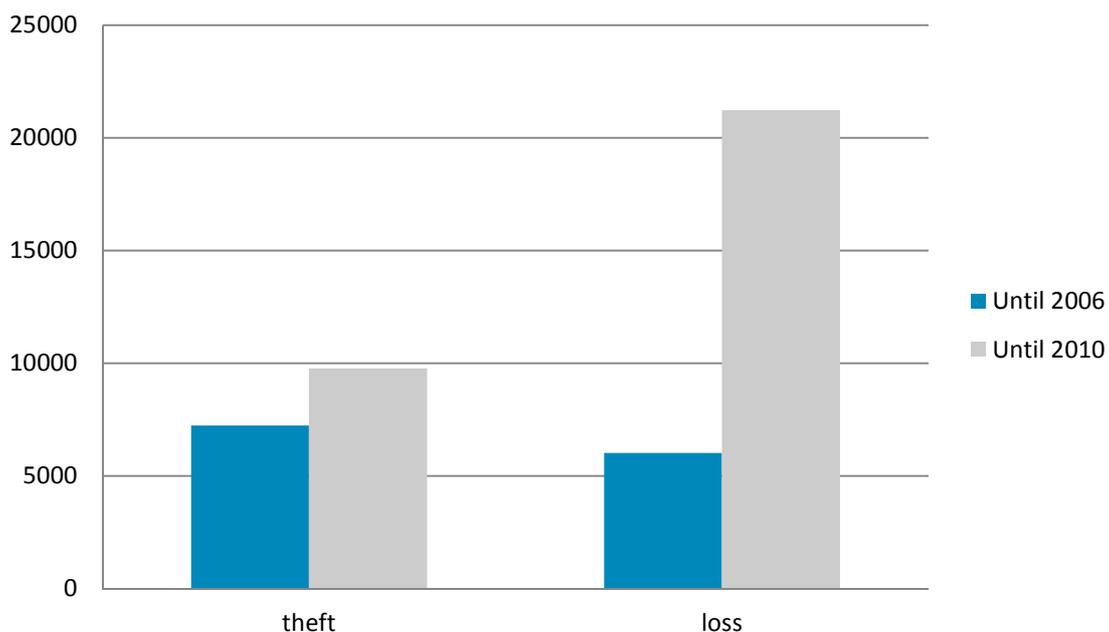
^a For example, the figures provided during a press conference by the Province of East Flanders for its gun collecting campaign differ from the figures featured in the yearly activity reports of the provincial governors.

is thus impossible to verify the claim that the new Weapons Act has led to an increase in illegal gun ownership. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a large proportion of the guns that have neither been handed in or regularized – and which have thus become illegal – are known. After all, they are recorded in the CWR.

2.4 Stolen and lost guns

To conclude this section on registered gun ownership in Belgium, we may look at another interesting set of statistics in the CWR. The register keeps record of the guns that have been declared as ‘stolen’ or ‘lost’. Figure 3 shows that the number of ‘stolen’ and ‘lost’ guns increased significantly between 2006 and 2010. In the fifteen-year period between 1991 and 2006, 6.019 guns were declared as ‘lost’. This figure increased by 15,203 guns in only 3,5 years. In other words, while every year between 1991 and 2006 an average of 375 guns were declared as ‘lost’, this annual average was up to ten times higher - with more than 4,300 - between October 2006 and March 2010.

Figure 3: Number of guns registered as stolen and lost, 1991-2006 and 1991-2010



In table 6 we link the numbers of guns that were registered as stolen or lost between October 2006 and March 2010 to the type of licence or authorization. In this table the figures relating to ‘defence’ guns and ‘military firearms’ clearly stand out. A large number of these categories of firearms were registered as stolen or lost between October 2006 and March 2010. The ratio between the number of guns declared as lost or stolen and the total number of active guns is much higher for ‘defence’ guns and ‘military firearms’ than for the other categories of guns (such as guns that can be obtained on a sport shooter’s licence or a hunting permit). For the moment, there does not seem to be a clear explanation for the large number of defence’ guns and ‘military firearms’ that are registered in the CWR as ‘stolen’ or ‘lost’. A possible hypothesis is that a number of gun owners truly lost their guns, but were not aware of the loss or had not bothered to report it until the new legislation was introduced, when they realized that they had either to regularize or sell

their guns or to hand them in. It is worth noting, however, that for these categories of guns, licences could only be renewed under the (stricter) conditions of the new law - which implied for example that gun owners had to prove they had a legitimate reason for possessing a gun (e.g. sports shooting or collecting). This observation leads to a second possible hypothesis, namely that a number of gun owners, who realized they would never be able to keep their guns under the new law, reported them as stolen or lost. Thus they could keep their weapons without them being registered in the CWR as active guns. Given the lack of reliable data it is, however, impossible to verify this hypothesis.

Table 6: Number of guns that have been registered as stolen and lost, per type of licence, 2010^a

Type of licence/authorization	March 2010	Number of registrations between October 2006 and March 2010	
	'Active' guns	Theft	Loss
Authorized arms dealer	5	6	0
Authorized collector	22,118	12	35
Licensed 'defence gun'/'military firearm'	362,400	1,898	10,858
Transfer of 'hunting/sporting rifle'	95,274	385	4,191
Licensed 'found' gun	40	3	2
Confiscated gun	4	0	2
One-year licence under new Weapons Act	857	1	1
Licence under new Weapons Act	104,893	81	45
Hunting permit	115,757	127	63
Target shooter's licence	27,000	22	2
Special hunting guard permit	461	3	0
Historic/folkloric events	289	0	1
Licence without ammunition	11,346	1	3
Total	740,444	2,539	15,203

Source: Federal Police, Central Weapons Registry (statistics for October 2006 and March 2010)

^a The CWR also has categories for weapons that were handed in after theft or were recovered. These figures need to be taken into account in order to interpret the figures in terms of loss and theft. In October 2006, the CWR listed 79 guns as handed in after theft, and 97 as found. In March 2010 the figures were 102 and 121 respectively. These figures thus have little or no impact on the interpretation of the figures for guns that were registered as stolen or lost.

3 Estimated gun ownership based on surveys

As we have seen, it is very difficult to estimate the total number of guns in Belgium. The figures from the CWR indicate that currently there are about 409,000 registered active gun owners in Belgium, who together own approximately 740,000 registered guns. Next to these registered guns and gun owners, we have absolutely no idea how many other guns there are in Belgium, such as firearms that can be obtained without an authorization and illegally held guns. A possible way of estimating gun ownership and the total number of guns (legal as well as illegal) is to use anonymous telephone surveys among a representative sample of the population. Of course, there are many methodological pitfalls linked to asking respondents about gun ownership. American research has however shown that it is possible to obtain useful results with questions about household guns in telephone surveys.⁹ In this paragraph we will analyse the results of two surveys that enquired into gun ownership in Belgium.

Various large-scale international phone surveys about public health and security issues are organized on a regular basis. In this paper we shall look at the ‘International Crime Victims Survey’ (ICVS) which was conducted for the first time in 1989 and repeated in 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004-2005. For the different rounds of the survey, a total of more than 300.000 respondents in thirty countries were interviewed about their experiences with crime and victimization.¹⁰ One of the questions in the survey was whether there was a gun present in the respondents’ household. Although this type of question poses a number of methodological problems – e.g. because of the tendency of respondents to give socially desirable or evasive answers – the results are interesting and indicative, not least because they allow a comparative insight into gun ownership from an international perspective.

Table 7: Gun ownership in European households, international perspective (percentages), 1989-2005^a

	1989		1992-1994		1995-1998		1999-2003		2004-2005	
	G	HG	G	HG	G	HG	G	HG	G	HG
Finland	25.5	7.2	25.4	6.3	28.8	6.0	23.7	6.4	37.9	6.3
Switzerland	32.8	13.9	-	-	35.3	13.8	35.7	11.8	28.6	10.3
France	25.3	5.9	-	-	22.6	4.9	18.2	2.8	16.1	3.7
Austria	-	-	-	-	15.3	8.1	-	-	15.1	5.6
Italy	-	-	16.1	5.5	-	-	-	-	12.9	5.3
Germany	9.2	6.7	-	-	-	-	-	-	12.5	4.2
Belgium	16.5	6.4	15.6	6.7	-	-	11.4	4.3	11.4	5.2
England and Wales	4.7	0.4	4.2	0.6	3.9	0.5	3.1	0.1	6.1	0.5
Netherlands	2.0	0.9	2.0	1.4	2.3	0.9	1.7	0.8	4.8	1.3

Source: J. van Dijk, J. van Kesteren en P. Smit (2007), Criminal Victimization in International Perspective. Key findings from the 2004-2005 ICVS and EU ICS

^a G: gun (all types). HG: handgun.

Table 7 shows that when we compare nine European countries, gun ownership in households is the highest in Finland and Switzerland. In 2004-2005 a gun was present in respectively 37.9% and 28.6% of all households in these countries. These were mainly rifle-type weapons. The lowest rates are found in the Netherlands and in England and Wales, where 4.8% and 6.1% of all households were said to own a gun. In this ranking Belgium is just below the middle group. According to the ICVS, in 2004-2005 11.4% of all Belgian households owned a gun and 5.2% of all Belgian households owned a handgun.

More recent statistics about the rates of gun ownership in Belgian households are available through a telephone survey commissioned by the Flemish Peace Institute among a representative sample of over thousand Belgians. The survey was conducted by TNS Dimarso in September 2010. We asked the respondents exactly the same question that figured in the 'International Crime Victims Survey': "Do you or a member of your household own a gun?"^a Table 8 shows that in total 5.1% of all respondents answered the question affirmatively. Further, 1.1% of all respondents answered "don't know" or did not wish to answer the question.

Table 8: Gun ownership in households in Belgium (percentages), September 2010

Do you or a member of your household own a gun?	
Yes	5.1%
No	93.7%
Don't know – no answer	1.1%
Total (N=1057)	100%

Our analysis indicates that gun ownership rates in Belgium vary significantly by region.^b The percentage is significantly higher in the Walloon region (9.3%) than in the Flemish region (3.4%). This comes as no surprise in view of the CWR statistics discussed above. Also noteworthy is the high percentage of households in the Brussels region owning a gun (5.2%); the more so as our analyses show no significant differences in rates of gun ownership rates related to the degree of urbanization.

Table 9: Percentage of households owning a gun by region, 2010

Region of the respondent	Percentage of gun ownership in households
Flemish Region	3.4%
Walloon Region	9.3%
Brussels Capital Region	5.2%

It is safe to say that the survey results, indicating that 5.1% of Belgian households own a gun (table 9), are an underestimate of real household ownership rates. Taking the total number of households in Belgium into account, we calculated that on the basis of this percentage the number of gun owners in Belgium in 2010 would be at least 250,000 to 300,000, while the official statistics of the CWR show that in 2010 more than 400.000 gun owners were registered in the CWR. Nevertheless,

^a This survey was included in an anonymous omnibus survey, with questions on a wide range of themes, in order to avoid socially desirable answers as much as possible.

^b Chi2= 14.581; sign.=0.001.

the results of the telephone survey are useful, for instance when we chart the evolution of gun ownership in Belgium between 1989 and 2010. While aware of the methodological problems linked to combining results from different surveys, in view of the fact that both surveys used exactly the same wording for the question on gun ownership, we have collated the results from the 'International Crime Victims Surveys' from 1989 to 2004-2005 in table 10 with the results from the our survey in 2010. The combined results of both surveys for Belgium indicate that gun ownership in Belgium has significantly decreased over the last twenty years. In the early 1990s the percentage fluctuated around 16%, while by the middle of the first decade of the 21st century the rate had dropped to 11.4% and in 2010 to 5.1%. If we compare the rate of 2004-2005 (before the new Weapons Act) with that of 2010, the percentage of households that admit to owning a gun has halved.

Table 10: Evolution of the percentage of households which own a gun, 1989-2010

Period	Percentage of households owning a gun
1989	16.5%
1992-1994	15.6%
1999-2003	11.4%
2004-2005	11.4%
2010	5.1%

Figures for 1989-2005: Dijk, van Kesteren & Smit (2007)

Figures for 2010: survey Flemish Peace Institute – TNS Dimarso

In conclusion, we can state that based on the results of telephone surveys, there are indications that rates of gun ownership in Belgium have declined over the last two decades. This finding is in line with the CWR data that show a decrease in the number of registered guns between 2006 and 2010, although it does not run parallel with the number of registered gun owners in the CWR, which increased somewhat in these years.

Table 11: Attitudes vis-à-vis the statement, "There are too many guns in our society", by region

	Flemish region	Walloon region	Brussels region
(Completely) agree	64.3%	74.1%	67.0%
Neutral	20.6%	13.9%	26.0%
(Completely) disagree	15.1%	11.9%	7.0%
	N=647	N=294	N=100

Nonetheless, to conclude this analysis, it is interesting to compare the decreasing rate of households admitting to ownership of a gun with another result of our telephone survey of 2010. Our survey showed that two thirds of the Belgian population (67%) are of the opinion that there are too many guns in Belgium, while only a small minority of the population (13%) disagree with this statement. The consensus that there are too many guns in Belgium extends across the sexes, age groups and education levels, although women (75%) tend to agree more with this statement than men (59%), and the rate of agreement grows in line with respondents' age and education level. Our analyses also show that the concern about too many guns is more dominant in the

Walloon region (74%) than in the Flemish region (64%) and in the Brussels region (67%)^a (see table 11), and that this difference cannot be explained by the degree of urbanization. Our analyses finally show that, statistically speaking, there is no significant difference between people who own guns and the rest of the population : the vast majority of gun owners are also of the opinion that there are too many guns in our society (61%). Only a small minority of them disagree (20%).

^a This is a statistically significant difference: $\text{Chi}^2=15.168$; $\text{df}=4$; $\text{sign}=0.004$.

4 Conclusions

The media and various other sources often claim that in Belgium an estimated 1.5 to 2 million firearms are owned by civilians. This estimate is, however, highly problematic given that the source and method used remain unclear. A number of factors make estimating the total number of firearms possessed by civilians in Belgium a complex matter. First, a significant number of these firearms are possessed illegally. The specific nature of illegal gun ownership in Belgium and the lack of good statistics on seized weapons make it difficult to paint an accurate picture of the number of illegal firearms. Second, despite the existence of a national Central Weapons Register (CWR), the number of firearms legally possessed by civilians in Belgium remains unclear as a result of problematic data inputting on licensed firearms in the CWR. In addition, there is no registration of the significant number of firearms that can be acquired and held legally by civilians without a permit. It is safe to say that nobody knows how many firearms are currently in private hands in Belgium. In this paper we have used a combination of two methods to shed some light on the size and nature of gun ownership in Belgium: (1) the official statistics of the Belgian CWR and the databases of provincial weapons administrations, and (2) the results of telephone surveys.

Belgium is one of the few countries in Europe that has an official national database on firearms. In the national register, the CWR, approximately 410,000 civilians are registered as active possessors of a total of 740,000 firearms subject to authorization. This comes down to approximately 39 registered gun possessors and 70 registered firearms for every 1,000 persons. Although we have to be careful in analysing these statistics – e.g., large numbers of weapons in the CWR are still registered in categories of the old legislation, pointing to a significant administrative backlog – the CWR statistics provide a useful tool for deriving some information on gun possession in Belgium. For example, they indicate that the rate of registered firearms possession is twice as high in the Walloon region (101 firearms per 1,000 inhabitants) as in the Flemish region (52 firearms per 1,000 inhabitants). We can also deduce that two groups of gun possessors exist in Belgium: a rather small group of gun owners (hunters, sport shooters, collectors, etc) who possess several guns, and a larger group of persons who own only one or two guns. Yet, this figure of 740,000 firearms is an underestimate of the total number of firearms in Belgium. In reality the number is significantly higher, given the 'grey' number of unlicensed firearms in Belgium (both legally and illegally possessed). Despite a number of methodological pitfalls, cross-national longitudinal anonymous telephone surveys among a representative sample of the population can help to fill out the picture. These surveys indicate that Belgium ranks in a middle group of European countries with regard to firearms possession. In 2010 approximately 5.1% of households claimed they had a gun in their house. As with the official government statistics, this is also an underestimate. Nevertheless, the results of longitudinal surveys on gun ownership are particularly useful in charting the evolution of the total number of firearms.

Although we do not know the exact figure of ownership, several indications exist that the number of firearms in civilian hands in Belgium has decreased in recent years. Available data from the longitudinal telephone surveys indicate that gun ownership in Belgium has decreased significantly over the last two decades: from 16% in the early 1990s to 5% in 2010. Another indication is that the CWR statistics showed a 6% decrease in registered firearms between 2006 and 2010 (47,000 firearms). We believe this decrease can be explained, among other things, by the surrender of a minimum of 200,000 firearms during the large-scale collection campaigns (between June 2006 and October 2008) that accompanied the introduction of the new arms legislation in 2006.

Unfortunately, the available statistics on firearms handed in do not distinguish between whether these firearms were previously held legally or illegally. Critics have argued that the enforcement of the stricter arms legislation has not diminished the total number of firearms circulating in Belgium, but only changed the proportion between legally and illegally possessed firearms. They argue the new legislation gave rise to an increase in illegal gun ownership since many gun owners chose not to declare their guns out of fear of not being able to keep them. CWR data on the number of 'stolen' and 'lost' firearms suggest that a number of persons indeed have not regularized their guns and kept or sold their weapons illegally. The annual average of lost guns rose from 375 between 1991 and 2006 to more than 4300 in the 3.5 year period after the implementation of the new legislation. In addition, most of these figures relate to defence guns and military firearms, permits for which could only be renewed under stricter conditions in the new legislation. Given the problematic nature of the available statistics, however, it is impossible to verify whether the new legislation has led to an increase in illegal gun ownership in Belgium. During the large-scale firearms collections, for example, no detailed records were kept on the nature and status of the weapons that were handed in.

In recent years several attempts have been taken to remedy the problem of a lack of reliable and detailed statistics, for example by gradually correcting the existing errors in the CWR and implementing new software that allows data inputs to this national register to be optimized. Another initiative is the recent proposal to limit the types of firearms that can be obtained without authorization. Once this proposal is implemented, more guns will be registered in the CWR which will diminish the 'grey area' of firearms ownership in Belgium. A continued effort to improve data collection will thus enable more accurate estimates of Belgian gun ownership. Even so, a comprehensive and detailed account of gun ownership will not be possible in the near future due to the significant hidden number of illegal firearms, especially in non-criminal hands. Therefore, more research on the illegal possession of firearms in Belgium is needed to complete our picture of gun ownership.

Endnotes

- ¹ For these estimates see Karp, Aaron. 2007. 'Completing the Count: Civilian firearms.' Small Arms Survey 2007: Guns and the City, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Annexe 4 – Civilian firearms inventories 178 countries (ranked by total firearms, in descending order) and Annexe 5 – Countries ranked by the rate of total gun ownership (firearms per 100 people).
- ² Draft Act holding the regulation of economic and individual activities with weapons, session 2005-2006, nr. 2263/001, Chamber of Representatives, 7 February 2006, p. 8.
- ³ Poitevin, C. (2006), 'Note d'Information.' New Arms Legislation in Belgium. Brussels: Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité, Brussels: GRIP, 21 June 2006.
- ⁴ See e.g. <http://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/belgium>.
- ⁵ De Ceuster, J., Van den Meerschaut, E. and Chainiaux, P. (2009), *Handboek: de Wapenwet*, Brussel: Politeia, annex AH, p. 413-416.
- ⁶ Article 4, Council Directive 91/477/EEC of 18 June 1991 on control of the acquisition and possession of weapons, as revised in 2008.
- ⁷ See http://joinup.ec.europa.eu/community/community_national_firearms_register/description.
- ⁸ Comité P. (2004), *Onderzoek naar de lokale vuurwapenregisters en het centraal wapenregister – syntheseverslag*, http://www.comitep.be/2004/Tussent_verslagen/wr.pdf, consulted on 15 October 2009.
- ⁹ Kellerman, A.L., Rivara, F.P. & Banton, J. (1990), Validating survey responses to questions about gun ownership among owners of registered handguns, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 131:6, p. 1080-1084. Rafferty, A.P., Thrush, J.C., Smith, P.K. and McGee, H.B. (1995), Validity of a Household Gun Question in a Telephone Survey, *Public Health Reports*, 110:3, p. 282-288.
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Authors:

Nils Duquet
Maarten Van Alstein

Chief Editors:

Tomas Baum
Alyson JK Bailes

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Flemish Peace Institute

Leuvenseweg 86

1000 Brussels

tel. +32 2 552 45 91

vredesinstituut@vlaamsparlement.be

www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu

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