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Violence against police officers- an urgent need for common EU response

Executive summary

*In Europe we are experiencing the **increasing epidemic of violence against police officers**. This violence can include verbal abuse and hate crimes, sexual assaults and most commonly physical violence against police officers and police staff. Development of social media creates its own specific challenges, and the future will bring even more hybrid threats. EuroCOP, the association representing police officers, has been vocal on the matter for an extended period of time. However, this deteriorating situation has been routinely ignored by EU decision makers. In many EU countries data is not collected which makes it even more difficult to understand the causes and consequences of this dangerous phenomenon. It is important to note that data is recorded in third countries such as Norway, Iceland, United Kingdom or United States. The aim is to look at emerging trends, improve training, ensure consistent support for victims of assaults and work with the criminal justice system around outcomes and sentencing. This is why EuroCOP is calling on EU decision makers to establish a **central repository of data in the EU as regards incidences of violence against police officers**, potentially via Eurostat. Collection of data at EU level would help understand the roots of the problem, exchange best practice between Members States and adapt safety awareness training programs for police officers.*

Introduction

In Europe we are experiencing the **increasing epidemic of violence against police officers**. This violence can include verbal abuse and hate crimes, sexual assaults and most commonly physical violence against police officers and police staff. EuroCOP¹, an organization which represents 30 police unions and staff organisations across Europe as well as over 230,000 police officers in 25 European countries, has been vocal on that topic for an extended period of time. Already in February 2022 EuroCOP President has sent a letter to the Members of the LIBE Committee of the European Parliament, in which it called for a parliamentary debate on the issue. **Thus far, this deteriorating situation has been routinely ignored at EU level.** This is a deplorable situation for police officers, who are society's front-line protectors, and have borne the brunt of civil unrest associated with

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e.g. COVID lockdown protests through enforcing said lockdowns. More recently police officers were involved in civil unrest related to difficult social reforms. Police officers are the first line of response for violent situations with their role bringing them into direct conflict with the public to enforce law and maintain order. Police officers require suitable protection both in terms of safety equipment but also from the law and the criminal justice system. This message was conveyed on 19th October 2023 by EuroCOP's Exec. Committee member, Ms Angels Bosch Camprecios, when she testified in front of the Democracy, Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights Monitoring Group of the European Parliament². To delay a focus on this situation, may affect the moral of police officers and their safety, impact on recruitment and decrease confidence in the police and criminal justice processes.

Violence against police is raising in Europe - Analysing the situation

Incidents of violence against police officers in Europe are growing in numbers. These include random attacks, deliberate assaults and violence towards police resulting from periods of civil unrest.

EuroCOP members have observed in recent years and months an increasing trend of aggression and violence against police officers, less respect for uniform and decreasing trust in the legitimacy of policing.

In addition, the development of social media creates its own specific challenges and the future will bring even more hybrid threats. However, there is a lack of reliable data at national as well as EU level, which makes it even more difficult to address this challenge. Existing national legislation does not match the reality and very often the root causes are not properly identified.

Where data are recorded, EuroCOP members have recently reported a trend on the rise regarding the number of cases of violence against police officers (Table 1).

- In **Spain** data available confirm the seriousness of the issue. In Navarra³ 112% increase in cases of violence against police has been recorded in 3 years (25 cases in 2017 and 53 in 2020). In Catalonia in 4 years, an increase of 66.38% has been observed (2,799 cases in 2017 and 4,657 cases in 2021). The

² See full video recording of the 19th October DRFMG at:

https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/committee-on-civil-liberties-justice-and-home-affairs-drfgm-meeting_20231019-0830-COMMITTEE-LIBE

³ <https://navarra.ccoo.es/18aaa53a9d97f6657a9986661330913f000066.pdf>

most recent data from 2022 show an increase of another 6.16%⁴. National Police and Guardia Civil have observed an increase of 19.71% in 3 years (9,967 cases in 2018 and 11,932 cases in 2021)⁵.

- Data are also being collected **in Germany**⁶. Between 2021 and 2022 an increase of 7,1% of cases of resistance to and physical attacks on state police has been recorded (37,778 cases in 2020; 39,239 cases in 2021 and 42,013 cases in 2022).
- In **Sweden**, 340 accidents and incidents were reported at the occasion of Easter Riots in 2022 in several Swedish regions and cities. Police were clearly a target during these events- many police officers were injured and had to seek medical attention. Police cars were damaged.
- In **Belgium**⁷ a database (MISI) has been listing cases of violence against law enforcement officers since 2017/2018. On average, there are 12,462 incidents of violence per year, with a peak in 2020 at 13,343. In 2022, 10,663 cases of violence against police have been recorded, but it is admitted that these figures are incomplete. Even if the numbers in the last year seem to be lower than the average, they are still significant and alarming. The number of violence cases in Belgium translates into: 4,303 offences such as rebellions, 2,486 offences such as indignation, 1,057 offences against physical integrity (assault and battery), 859 public safety offences (threats), 253 verbal violence while drunk and 1,675 other acts of violence.
- An increasing trend is observed **in France**. Attacks against the national police have more than doubled in the last twenty years (13,392 cases in 2000 and 27,659 in 2019). Only in January 2021 2,288 cases of violence against police have been recorded and more than 85 incidents of “violence against persons holding public authority” are recorded every day for the national police alone. These figures are most probably underestimated.⁸
- In **Portugal**, the Home Affairs Minister has recently admitted, that only from January till August 2023, 1300 aggression cases against police officers have been committed. Portuguese government believes,

⁴ https://mossos.gencat.cat/ca/els_mossos_desquadra/indicadors_i_qualitat/estadistica/

⁵ <https://www.ine.es/up/NvD9x6p8i2K>

⁶ https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/sicherheit/pks-2022.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4

⁷ <https://moustique.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/2023/05/01/la-justice-lache-t-elle-les-policiers-261066>

⁸ https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/02/22/les-faits-de-violence-a-l-encontre-de-la-police-nationale-ont-plus-que-double-en-vingt-ans_6070753_3224.html

that this needs proper attention. As a consequence, a proposal has been put forward to criminalize the cases of violating physical integrity of police officers, which can lead to a prison sentence⁹.

Table 1. Number of cases of violence against police officers recorded in some EU Member States

Country	Period considered	Variation in numbers	Variation in percentage	Comment
Spain	2018-2021	+ 1,965 cases	+ 19,71 %	
Germany	2021-2022	+ 4,235 cases	+ 11,21 %	
Sweden	2022	-	-	340 cases of violence recorded only at the occasion of Easter riots
Belgium	2020-2022	-2,680 cases	- 20,09 %	These figures are incomplete. Even if the numbers in the last year seem to be lower than the average, they are still significant and alarming.
France	2000-2019	+ 14,267 cases	+ 206%	

From physical aggression, through verbal assaults to cyberthreats

In **Denmark**, availability of data is a problem however police officers are reporting cases of violence. An issue that is gaining on importance is **violence associated with social media such as sharing of videos with police officers** which makes them easily identifiable and vulnerable at the same time. This situation seriously affects their psychological wellbeing.

⁹ <https://www.dn.pt/sociedade/amp/mais-de-1300-policias-agredidos-entre-janeiro-e-agosto-deste-ano--17228336.html>

Similar problems are reported by police officers from **Finland**, especially **online targeting and shaming**: 7,5% of respondents in the Personnel Barometer said they had experienced targeting, 26% said they had experienced the targeting of colleagues. In the past few years Finland has also seen an increase in the use of force against police officers- they encounter more often armed subjects without prior history of violence which is gaining in importance.

In 2020, **Belgian Police**¹⁰ carried out a survey on the violence suffered by police officers. 4,000 respondents participated. More than 75% of them declared having been confronted in the last twelve months with **verbal violence** and at least two **violent offences** (threats, intimidation). In addition, more than 38% declared having been **victims of physical violence** in the last twelve months.

Available data **for France** show the distribution of victims of physical (excluding sexual or domestic violence) and verbal violence among certain professions. The analysis highlights a significantly greater exposure to violence recorded for police officers, gendarmes and prison guards. National police officers and gendarmes represent half of the victims recorded for these attacks, far ahead of municipal police officers (8%), transport officers (5%), prison guards (4%), teachers (4%) or social workers (4%).¹¹

Third countries face similar problems and are coming up with a patchwork of solutions

Similar trends with regards to the violence against police are observed outside the European Union.

- Statistics in **Norway** are showing an increase year after year. In 2022, 1,664 reports of violence against the police and 879 reports for threats against the police have been recorded with some serious cases that drew media attention¹². Some steps have been already taken to remedy this situation. Norwegian police is working in order to understand the problem and to look for structural solutions. Working groups have been established, that are focusing on priority areas such as working alone, assistance of psychiatric healthcare, safety in buildings. Parallel to this work, a parliamentary committee has been established to look into solutions to identity protection, the use of force and bodycams.

¹⁰ <https://moustique.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/2023/05/01/la-justice-lache-t-elle-les-policiers-261066>

¹¹ <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Interstats/Publications/Interstats-Info-rapide/Info-rapide-n-21-Violences-physiques-et-verbales-enregistrees-par-les-services-de-securite-depuis-2016-une-premiere-approche-des-victimes-par-profession>

¹² Internal data of Norwegian Police Directorate

- Like Norway, **Iceland** does also have a centralized database of violence against police which is in place since 2016. There is an increasing trend and two main concerns seem to gain in importance: shortage of police officers in rural areas exposing those in office to greater risks as well as too many young officers with little experience. A number of measures have been already applied to address the main challenges such as the use of body cameras, a peer support system, psychological trauma support, annual health checks. Further changes in trainings and improvement of psychological support are also planned.
- In the **United Kingdom**, data on assaults against police officers are collected centrally by the Home Office, inviting submissions from the main 43 police forces and British Transport Police. In March 2022, there were just over 41,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales (including British Transport). 29,491 were crimes of “assault without injury on a constable” recorded across all forces, which presents an increase of 11% compared with 26,539 in the previous year. 11,730 crimes of “assault with injury on a constable” were recorded across all forces (including British Transport Police), which represents a small increase of 2.6% compared with 11,429 in the previous year. It is expected that the data for next year will be comparable or if not higher than previous years. **There has been a focus on a better understanding of assaults through recording data and encouraging reporting by police officers.** Central to this is Operation Hampshire, which is a national programme of work around violence against police officers. **The aim is to look at emerging trends, improve training, ensure consistent support for victims or assaults and work with the criminal justice system around outcomes and sentencing**¹³.

Social and economic causes of violence against police officers

Unfortunately, too little attention is being paid to the phenomenon of violence against police, including qualitative and quantitative analysis as well as its causes and consequences. In that respect a study by **Dr Lee Johnson “Understanding Assaults against Police Officers: A study of conflict escalation in police encounters with the public”**¹⁴ is of particular importance. The thesis began after reflecting that the most recent studies

¹³ <https://www.oscarkilo.org.uk/services/operation-hampshire>

¹⁴ <https://www.oscarkilo.org.uk/media/2866/download?inline>

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on assaults in the United Kingdom were from the 1990s and were often solely quantitative based studies. The study by Johnson was conducted between 2011 and 2019.

In the work, it is argued that domestic incidents as well as assistance calls relating to mental health present an increased risk of assault to officers. The main argument focuses on how the role of the police places officers at risk of conflict escalating with the public. Perceived trust in the police and their actions being seen as legitimate also affected the chance of assault. Other factors relating to assaults included the consumption of alcohol, association with risk factors such as drug use and the presence of prior violence to the police attending. At domestic incidents, many of the factors associated with assaults were present including other violent offences, alcohol consumption, enforcement of the law in a private space and existing hostility towards the police.

In England and Wales, the increasing number of assistance calls linked to mental health is linked to changes in the provision of **mental health care** from health-funded institutions to community care and austerity measures. This is placing an increasing burden on the police and other frontline emergency services to cope with any increasing demand. Taking into account the silent epidemic of mental disorders in the EU and difficult situation of many public health systems this might be also the case in many EU countries. It has been noted that incidents relating to mental health often take longer to resolve and should be dealt with by correctly trained staff. What is more, police-public encounters involving mental health create a lot of risk both for the police officers and the person involved. Even where the direct call to the police does not relate directly to mental health, decline of mental health or the mental wellbeing of the suspect may affect the outcome of an incident.

Social and economic consequences of violence against police officers

Violence against police results in medical leave and no-show of officers at the workplace. Even if 81% of officers questioned by Johnson reported, that they have not lost time at work due to injury, this may also result from “presenteeism”, where an officer comes into work despite sickness or injury, because they do not want their shift colleagues to suffer from staffing levels that are below minimum requirements. 2% of questioned officers have reported major loss of work time, 6% were absent up to 3 days and 4% were absent longer. **Every assault injury that results in sick leave costs the police in lost time, sometimes costs associated**



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with spending money on treatment, and potential difficulties in resourcing shifts. Officers may also want to show that they have not been affected by being assaulted and therefore the impact of an occupational police culture should not be under-stated. These data mask any **psychological harm that results from assaults.** An officer could be present at work but suffering from mental health issues as a result of the assault. In a period of higher demand, factors such as tiredness, exhaustion or trauma may affect officers and their behaviour and response to assaults or ability to minimise the risk of assault. Moreover, with the focus of assaults being on frontline response officers, the chance of repeat victimisation across a career or even a year period is inflated. The cumulative impact of assaults may be a hidden risk to police forces moving forward.

A detailed assessment of financial consequences of violence against police has been carried out by Luis A. García Segura, coordinator of the Nebrija-Santander Global Risk and Conflict Management, at the Nebrija University. He has summarized his findings in the study *“The cost of violence against Police and Civil Guard officers in Spain”*¹⁵. According to his estimations the costs of violence cases faced by Police and Civil Guard officers in Spain accounted for 417m Euros in 2021: 28 m Euros was due for physical damage to the officers, 41 m Euros were spent on administrative and judicial proceedings and 347 m Euros for police investigations¹⁶. The report from Nebrija and Aaxon University also shows, that in 2021 there were 10,264 cases of aggression against police with 3,8 m Euros in health costs, 4,74 m Euros in costs for sick days and 19,5 m Euros in costs for permanently injured people. The study also specifies, that due to attacks 1,240 officers were on leave (12% of the total number of those attacked), with a duration of 36.6 days on average, which would be equivalent to 3,824 Euros on average (4,7 m Euros in total). 186 officers each year suffer permanent damage. **The study also indicates indirect costs that could not be quantified, such as the loss of human life and injuries, damage to property, lack of police force and presence on the street, increased workload for other personnel when his/her fellow agents are on leave or expenses on the prison system.**

While working on the report Luis A. García Segura has faced numerous challenges with access to data and he had to use various sources of information, including direct interviews with police officers. This highlights the

¹⁵ <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/the-cost-of-violence-against-police-and-guardia-civil-officers-totals-more-than-400-million-euros/20230814180128189543.html#:~:text=and%20direct%20interviews-,The%20cost%20of%20violence%20against%20Police%20and%20Guardia%20Civil,more%20than%20400%20million%20euros>

¹⁶ <https://confilegal.com/20230810-el-coste-de-la-violencia-contra-los-agentes-de-policia-y-guardia-civil-suma-mas-de-400-millones-de-euros/>

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need for public authorities to gather their own statistics in order to contribute to transparency and the right to public information.

You can't manage what you can't measure

On the basis of his research Johnson also drafted a number of recommendations. It is of paramount importance, that **personal safety training is as realistic to the role as possible** and focuses both on **control techniques as well as communication skills**, monitoring and awareness of non-verbal communication. Another important issue is **mental health awareness training** provided for all officers, which will assist in their ability to approach, communicate and effectively assist at such incidents to ensure the correct and safest outcome. Trainings shall also include **awareness raising about effects of drugs, signs and symptoms** especially on psychoactive substances. **Psychological support as well as any measures supporting personal wellbeing** should also be guaranteed. These recommendations fed into both local and national policies around assaults against officers with the work of Operation Hampshire focusing on three core aims:

1. Improving our understanding of assaults through collecting accurate data and focusing on key trends;
2. Ensuring all victims of assaults and crimes whilst on duty receive the right support;
3. Working with criminal justice partners to achieve the right and proportionate outcomes in cases of assaults against police officers and police staff.

Work continues locally in police forces and more broadly to focus on trends, including, the impact of recent intakes in officers, on the experience of officers being assaulted, the type and nature of assaults, the impact of the use of force by officers and the stage of the policing process during which the assault occurs.

What EuroCOP is calling for

EuroCOP strongly believes, that in order to address this rising trend in violence against police officers, a common European reaction is needed and cooperation between Member States shall be strengthened. However, there is currently no **central repository of data in the EU as regards incidences of violence against police officers**. EuroCOP considers this a serious issue that **must be addressed, potentially through Eurostat**.

This is what EuroCOP has been calling for in recent years. Various third countries from Europe such as Norway, Iceland and UK are already collecting data. Such data is also gathered in the United States under the Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) Data Collection by the FBI, yet in the EU, there is no centralised database of such incidences. This hinders the ability of law enforcement agencies in Europe to analyse the root causes of such incidences, and to prevent future incidences from occurring. For reference, the FBI's data collection has been extremely helpful in that the LEOKA data is routinely incorporated into **officer safety awareness training**. EuroCOP considers, that **developing a similar database at EU level would be extremely worthwhile**. The database should focus on much more than just counting the number of assaults and focus on the key details associated with each assault to understand trends and identify solutions.

Collection of data at EU level would help understand the roots of the problem, exchanging best practice between Members States and adapting safety awareness training programs for police officers. This is more important than ever. According to Eurostat¹⁷, the number of police officers is shrinking in many Member States. Improvement of safety and working conditions would be very helpful in addressing this trend. Collection of data should not pose a disproportionate burden on national administration as well as on Eurostat itself as data are already being collected e.g. on violence against women, gender based violence; crime, violence and vandalism in the area by degree of urbanisation, by level of activity limitation, sex and age.

¹⁷ <https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/4iakuagpa5yfonewjp1sya?locale=en>