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Presentation title: What drives people to (aspire to) legally acquire a firearms? Objective and subjective risks as motives for current and aspiring gun owners and challenges for the legal control system

Both legally and illegally held firearms are used to commit gun violence. Next to law enforcement efforts to combat illicit firearms trafficking, an adequate legal framework to control legal acquisition and possession of firearms is equally relevant in preventing gun violence. Gun ownership in Europe is, unlike in the US, only allowed for persons who have a good cause. A well-functioning control system is indispensable to guarantee that only persons with such a good cause effectively own guns to minimize the safety risks inherent to firearm possession. Despite a gradual increase in legal firearms possession in Belgium, still very little remains known about what drives people to acquire a firearm or at least consider doing so. A better insight in why people acquire or want to acquire guns could support control practices and procedures.

We use data from a 2019 survey of 2.500 adults living in Flanders (Belgium) who were questioned on (current, former, and aspired) firearms possession and the motives why they currently own a gun (or why not), or why they considered to acquire one. In a first step we analyze to what extent both victimization (as indicator of objective risk) and more generalized feelings of insecurity, trust in police and (dis)trust in government to guarantee security (as indicators of subjective risk) predict current and aspired gun possession. In a next step we look at the extent to which the legal controls and procedures on firearms possession influence decision-making processes in whether persons take concrete steps to acquire a firearm. Finally, we discuss the challenges our findings may pose to the existing control system.