

SITUATION UPDATE

December 2024



Balancing Control and Awareness: Firearms and Safety in Ukraine

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KEY FINDINGS

- Civilian firearms possession in Ukraine remains limited, likely due to regulatory policies and an ongoing supply–demand imbalance.
- Having actively fought in the war or having a veteran or combatant in the household significantly influences individuals’ perceptions of firearm ownership in civilian life. Most notably, household firearm ownership jumps eightfold to 24% when respondents themselves have directly participated in fighting, compared to 3% among households where nobody has fought in the war, with many former combatants reporting that they carry various weapons for self-protection.
- One year after the launch of the Unified Register of Weapons, the current survey found a sharp increase in awareness of the register among firearm-owning households to the extent that as of July 2024, 63% of firearm-owning households reported having (some of) their weapons recorded in the register, compared to 46% in December 2023.
- Two-thirds of the general population never received any kind of formal firearm safety training. Nevertheless, the vast majority of armed households stated that all adults and adolescents in their home are aware of basic firearm safety in terms of both handling and storing a firearm, and overwhelmingly implement the tested safety measures, except for the separation of ammunition from firearms, which is reportedly upheld by only 36% of households keeping firearms at home.

Context

The Small Arms Survey is undertaking several waves of public opinion surveys to gauge the perceptions of the Ukrainian population regarding the proliferation of firearms in the country and its impact on security. The project will conduct at least one more survey wave in 2025 in order to monitor developments over time.

Firearms possession and accessibility, and crime victimization

Self-reported civilian firearms possession in Ukraine remains limited, with 5% of households reporting possession, which is below pre-invasion levels, and the lowest since monitoring began.

After adjusting for gender differences in reporting—specifically projecting male responses for households with adult men due to lower reporting among women—self-reported firearms possession still stands at 6%.

Firearm acquisition is perceived as much more difficult than before the 2022 invasion, and even more so compared to just a year ago in December 2023 (Table 2).

Nearly one in ten of the crimes experienced by respondents and their family members involved firearms (9.3%), an increase from 5.8% in September 2023. The proportion of people who felt secure in their communities declined from three-quarters (75%) in January 2023 to two-thirds (67%) by July 2024. War-related insecurities also rose, with 30% reporting frequent shelling or bombardment, and 80% experiencing frequent or very frequent power outages, up from 9% in September 2023.

While reliance on firearms for personal protection has remained steady at around 2% (2.3% in July 2024), the share of those carrying any self-defence weapon (firearm, knife, pepper spray, etc.) reached a record 20%. Notably, 32% of women aged 18–29 carry some self-defence tool, and 7% of men aged 30–59 report carrying a firearm for protection. Women, on the other hand, do not carry firearms for self-defence (0%).

Table 1 Firearms possession rate in Ukraine (national adults)

	2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023	July 2024
Possession of firearms, self-reported, all households	6.0%	5.3%	6.7%	5.6%	5.1%

Sources: Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024)

Table 2 Firearms accessibility in Ukraine (national adults)

	2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023	July 2024
Very difficult or impossible to acquire a firearm	5.0%	33.4%	21.4%	26.2%	27.7%

Sources: Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024)

Table 3 Household-level crime victimization rates in Ukraine in the previous 12 months (national adults)

	2011	2019	January 2023	September 2023	December 2023	July 2024
Family or respondent victimized over the past year (any crime)	3.4%	6.7%	6.8%	8.2%	7.8%	8.9%

Sources: Inglehart et al. (2014); Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024)

Militarization and firearms

Since 2014 Ukraine has had to defend itself against Russian Federation attacks. Over the past decade many Ukrainians volunteered or were mobilized to defend the country, resulting in about 400,000 veterans from the 2014–15 conflict alone (Guest et al., 2022). International sources report a current standing army of approximately 680,000 active personnel, with 200,000 deployed at the front lines (Dettmer, 2024). The minister of defence stated that around 1 million people are in the security and military sector, including 800,000 in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Armyinform, 2023). The mobilization effort has created a significant population group with recent

combat experience, and has altered relationships with firearms. To explore this, the Small Arms Survey combined responses from the last two survey waves (December 2023 and July 2024) to compare firearm-related experiences and attitudes among individuals and families who participated in the defence of the country over the past decade.

Among the 3,500 individuals interviewed in December 2023 and July 2024, nearly one-quarter of respondents (23%) stated that they lived in households where members were currently or formerly engaged in hostilities. Notably, more than 5% of respondents indicated their own involvement in the Joint Force Operation/Anti-Terrorist Operation stage of hostilities

Table 4 Firearms possession and firearm-related attitudes according to participation in the war (combined results of the December 2023 and July 2024 survey waves)

	Is there a former or current combatant in the household?		
	Yes: the respondent (N = 186)	Yes: someone else (N = 620)	No (N = 2,695)
	%	%	%
Firearms are necessary	57	34	29
Access to firearms is easy	20	11	9
Access to ammunition is easy	19	11	9
Have a firearm at home	24	9	3
Have a firearm for conflict-related purposes* (among firearm owners)	50	25	12
Have a firearm for protection** (among firearm owners)	22	22	30
Have a firearm for hunting (among firearm owners)	30	45	52
Has + would like to have a firearm:	56	24	25
• personally has a firearm	16	3	2
• would like to have a firearm	40	21	23
Having a firearm makes/would make respondent safer	55	31	29
Carried any weapon for personal safety as protection against crime:	45	19	15
• a firearm	20	2	1
• a traumatic weapon	10	3	2
• some other weapon (knife, pepper spray, etc.)	28	15	12
Veterans will bring back firearms from military service (likely + very likely)	42	43	42
Ukraine will be less safe with armed veterans returning home (likely + very likely)	42	38	37

Notes: * 'Personal protection from enemy troops'; 'Precaution for future conflict, instability, war at location'; 'Member of armed forces/local militia/territorial defence'. ** 'Personal protection from gangs, criminals'; 'Protection of property (incl. business)'.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2024)

or the ongoing full-scale war—sometimes in both. Twelve per cent of those who have fought in the war since 2014 were women, and about 2% of all respondents in the July 2024 survey reported that they were currently serving in the military.¹

Having fought in the war significantly influences individuals' perceptions of firearms in civilian life. Although the group of survey participants—186 individuals—is relatively small, limiting generalizations from their responses, the differences between this group and the broader population are notable. While there may be some uncertainty in the estimates, the patterns are clear (see Table 4).

The likelihood of reporting firearm ownership triples in households with a military veteran or current combatant among their members, rising from 3% to 9%. This increases eightfold to 24% when respondents themselves have personally participated in combat.

This may include service weapons, but 16% of current and former combatants confirmed that they personally owned a firearm, while 40% expressed a desire to own one. This suggests that more than half of this group could potentially become firearm owners if access becomes more readily available and legal. The challenge of obtaining weapons and ammunition in Ukraine is evident, because only one-fifth of this group believe it is easy to acquire a firearm or ammunition. While this is higher than the 9% average in the general population, it is significantly lower than the 40% of Ukrainians who felt it was easy to acquire a firearm in our 2019 survey. Because national regulations have moved in a more permissive direction under martial law (Hideg, 2023), the increased difficulties of access can only be linked to limited supply because of the high demand for firearms on the front lines and/or increased civilian demand to acquire firearms. The latter is, however, not confirmed by a resulting increase in the firearms possession rate among civilians.

Among current and former combatants, 50% of gun-owning veterans keep firearms with the expectation

of some form of future conflict, compared to 12% of firearm owners in the general population without personal or family involvement in the war. Additionally, many in the combatant group reported carrying various weapons for self-protection. For instance, 20% stated they carried a firearm 'for security reasons' linked to concerns about crime in their area.

More than half (55%) of current and former combatants believe that having a firearm at home enhances safety, compared to 29% of households without veterans. Even those living with veterans reported a similarly low perception of the safety benefits of firearm ownership. This difference reflects the belief among firearm owners—over-represented in the combatant group—that firearms contribute to personal security.

Unified Register of Weapons

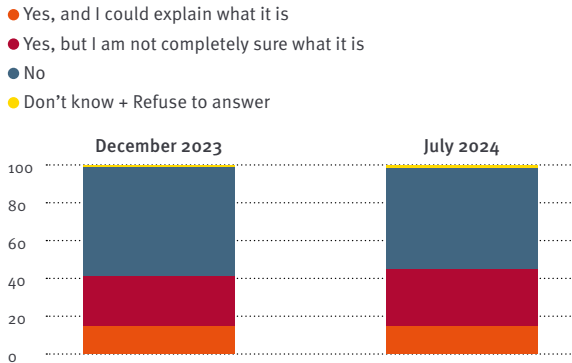
In response to the permissive wartime access to firearms and anticipated future firearms proliferation in Ukraine, the Ministry of Internal Affairs launched the Unified Register of Weapons in June 2023 (Ukraine Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2023). This initiative reflects the country's commitment to improving the monitoring of firearms through the introduction of enhanced digital registration procedures aimed at documenting firearm acquisitions and ensuring effective control over the entire life cycle of firearms.

One year after the register's launch, the July 2024 survey found no significant improvement in awareness of the register among the general population (Figure 1). Only 30% of Ukrainians had heard of it, but could not explain what it was (a percentage point increase of 4 from December 2023), while an additional 15% claimed to understand its purpose. The majority remained unaware of the registry (54%, a percentage point reduction of 4). Among firearm owners, awareness was higher: 79% were aware of the registry (representing an 18-point increase), with 44% (a 4-point increase) knowing its details, while the remaining 21% were unaware of it. This latter group nearly halved compared to December 2023,

¹ This question was not asked previously, hence no trend is available.

Figure 1 Awareness of the Unified Register of Weapons

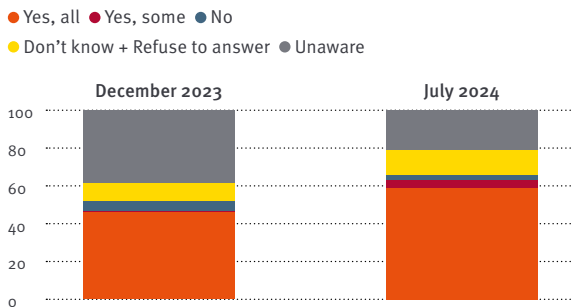
Have you heard about the Ukrainian Unified Register of Weapons? (% among all respondents)



Source: Small Arms Survey (2024)

Figure 2 Registration of household firearms in the Unified Register of Weapons

Are any of the firearms in this household recorded in the Unified Register of Weapons? (% among respondents with one or more firearms in the household)



Source: Small Arms Survey (2024)

when 39% had never heard of the Unified Register of Weapons (Hideg, 2023).

The survey indicates a trend of increased registration of firearms in the register, coinciding with heightened awareness among gun owners (Figure 2). As of July 2024, 63% of firearm-owning households reported having (some of) their weapons recorded in the

register, up from 46% in December 2023. Among those who were aware of the register, 74% stated that all their firearms were registered, while approximately 10% reported possessing unregistered firearms.

Firearm safety and security

As of July 2024, about one-third of interviewed Ukrainians reported receiving training on firearm safety,² with 24% having undergone formal training from the armed services or other sources.

A gender disparity becomes apparent, with 44% of men and only 8% of women claiming to have received formal firearm safety training. Additionally, 8% of all respondents received safety instructions from someone considered to be an expert or self-taught from the internet or books (Figure 3). Formal training is most common among men aged 60 and older. Despite Ukraine maintaining a conscript army (with a brief interruption in 2013–14), participation in military service and exposure to formal firearm safety training appear to have declined over time, particularly compared to the Soviet era (Bieri, 2015).

Overall, 81% of firearm-owning households had at least one adult who had undergone formal firearm training, with this figure rising to 90% when informal training was included. Additionally, 92% of respondents in households possessing firearms reported that all adults and adolescents in their home are ‘adequately aware of basic firearm safety in handling and storing a firearm’.

The survey assessed respondents’ knowledge of firearm safety (e.g. ‘What rules come to mind for the safe handling of firearms?’) and security (‘What rules come to mind for the safe storage of firearms at home?’). The first question was posed to all survey respondents, while the second only targeted those who reported having firearms at home.³ Respondents were invited to provide unprompted

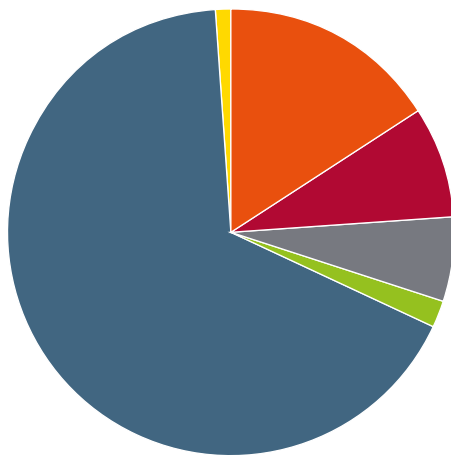
2 The language used in this paper reflects the language of the questionnaire, and does not rigorously distinguish between measures related to firearm safety and security. These were used in the colloquial sense, in the way that ordinary people would refer to them.

3 Seventy-seven per cent of firearm-owning households keep their firearms permanently at home, 8% bring them home occasionally, and 12% never store their firearms at home. Keeping weapons in family vehicles is rare, with 91% never doing so.

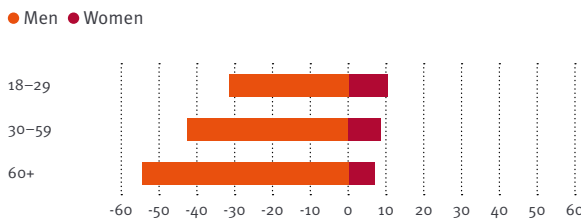
Figure 3 Firearm safety training in Ukraine

Did you, personally, receive any training about firearm safety? If yes, how?

- Yes, through military or other armed services training (incl. law enforcement) (16%)
- Yes, some other type of formal training (8%)
- Yes, a knowledgeable person explained it (6%)
- Yes, self-taught from the internet or from books (2%)
- No (67%)
- Don't know + Refuse to answer (1%)



Proportion of the general population who received any type of formal firearm training, by age and gender (%)



Source: Small Arms Survey (2024)

answers, which were either coded into pre-defined categories or recorded verbatim if they did not fit any pre-coded responses.

The results indicate that about half of Ukrainians could recall at least one firearm safety measure⁴ (Table 5). The most informed individuals were not those with formal training (64%), but rather the few self-taught individuals who learned from books and

the internet (79%). Among those without training, 39% could recall at least one safety measure.

Being able to recall safety measures seems to be closely related to the time since individuals received training. Figure 4 shows that young people without formal firearm safety training performed better at naming at least one safety measure—either from pre-coded options or spontaneous responses—compared to those over 60, mostly men, who received formal training, presumably during compulsory military service. Just over half of the latter group (54%) could recall a measure related to safe firearm handling, while more young respondents without formal training (63%) were able to do so.

Among households with firearms, the ability to recall any safety measure was significantly higher at 68%; however, nearly one-third of these respondents could not recall a specific rule for safe firearm handling. Most safety measures tested for were recalled more frequently in firearm-owning households; for instance, 48% spontaneously mentioned that firearms should always be pointed in a safe direction, compared to 26% of those without firearms at home. The only rule more commonly noted by individuals from households that did not own a firearm was to never handle a firearm under the influence of drugs or alcohol, which was mentioned by 10% in this group, compared to 6% of firearm owners.

Table 5 Ability to recall at least one firearm safety measure (all respondents, %)

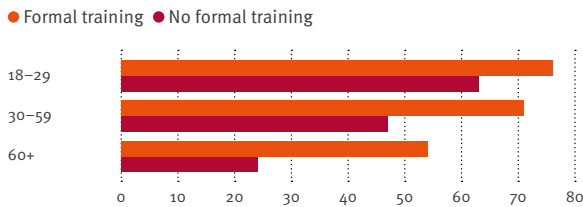
All respondents	49
By type of training:	
Formal training through military or other armed services training (incl. law enforcement)	64
Other formal training	70
A knowledgeable person explained it	76
Self-taught from the internet or from books	79
No training	39

Source: Small Arms Survey (2024)

4 These included: 'Always assume firearm is loaded', 'Point in a safe direction', 'Do not touch the trigger until ready to shoot', 'Know the safety mechanism', 'Never handle a firearm in an impaired/intoxicated condition', 'Only handle the firearm when necessary', 'Learn how to handle and use your firearm'.

Figure 4 Safety awareness and training

Ability to recall at least one safety measure while handling a firearm (% among the general population, by age and firearm safety training received)



Source: Small Arms Survey (2024)

Firearm owners were notably more knowledgeable about storage rules, with 90% recalling at least one security measure without prompting. Three-quarters mentioned the need to lock firearms in a secure place (74%), while 45% emphasized the need to keep firearms away from children. Additionally, 32% recalled that stored weapons must be unloaded, 26% noted that firearms and ammunition should be stored separately, and 13% stated that ammunition must also be kept in a secure location to prevent accidental access. This, of course, does not imply that those who failed to mention these measures were unfamiliar with them; rather, it indicates a mental hierarchy among the various measures contributing to safe firearm storage.

Finally, the survey asked respondents in households that keep firearms at home, whether occasionally or permanently, about their security practices, particularly regarding weapon storage (Table 6). The overall picture is positive, although not flawless. Every household reported locking away their firearms, and 98% claimed the weapons were out of children’s reach. Eighty per cent stated that they use the built-in safety switches or mechanisms on stored firearms, and only 4% indicated that not all weapons are kept unloaded. A notable issue is that in most households, firearms are stored with their ammunition, which is not ideal, but may be the only practical solution when there is a single location for locking away both guns and ammunition. Excluding this aspect, 85% of firearm owners who store weapons at home implement all listed safety measures; however, when including the separation of ammunition, this ratio drops to 33%.

Table 6 Security practices among households that (sometimes) keep firearms in the home (%)

(All) the firearms are locked away	100
(All) the firearm(s) are stored in a specialized gun-locker	94
(All) the firearm(s) are stored in a locked place (cabinet, locked room, locked shed, etc.)	95
(All) the firearm(s) are kept out of the reach of small children	98
(All) the firearm(s) have trigger locks*	80
(Some of) the firearm(s) are currently loaded	4
(Some of) the firearm(s) are kept together with their ammunition	59

Note: * ‘Trigger locks’ were understood by respondents to be the built-in safety device in the weapons, not the extra device that may be attached to firearms to provide an extra layer of security.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2024)

Conclusion

The relationship between Ukrainian society and firearms is evolving. The ongoing militarization of the country will present new challenges regarding firearms, their potential misuse, and overall safety. While civilian possession remains limited, policies must recognize the varied attitudes towards firearms among veterans and civilians, particularly in the context of post-conflict societal reintegration.

It is encouraging that awareness of the Unified Register of Weapons has sharply increased among firearm owners, leading to most household firearms being recorded in the database. An effective registration regime enhances domestic security and serves as a preventive measure against the potential illicit diversion of firearms, both domestically and internationally. The persistent lack of awareness of the register among the general population highlights the need to improve the visibility and awareness of this key initiative, however.

Public education on firearm safety and security is crucial for the effective management of privately held firearms, especially as the current conflict

subsidies. Policies should build on current information levels, recognize the importance of informal learning about firearm safety, and acknowledge that some existing knowledge may become outdated. This approach will help raise awareness of measures to prevent loss, diversion, misuse, and accidents related to civilian firearms. ●

Methodology

Ipsos Ukraine surveyed 1,750 randomly selected Ukrainian adults residing in the unoccupied territory of Ukraine between 6 June and 30 July 2024. The survey was carried out over the telephone, using random digit dialling methodology. It did not cover territories under Russian occupation at the time of data collection, including Crimea and parts of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions, thus excluding areas giving a home to nearly 20% of the pre-war population. While the estimates based on this sample facilitate our understanding of the war's effects on the Ukrainian people, we acknowledge the risk of bias, which, apart from the geographic limitations, is also due to the temporary absence of the refugee population currently living outside of Ukraine. Since the full-scale invasion in February 2022, all research cited in this paper has been carried out by Ipsos Ukraine using a similar methodology on each occasion. The January 2023 survey wave included 2,000 respondents, and since then 1,750 respondents were interviewed per wave. The 2019 results were obtained through the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology's nationally representative telephone omnibus survey, with 2,021 respondents (at that time Crimea and occupied parts of Luhansk and Donetsk were not covered) (Small Arms Survey, 2019). The detailed World Values Survey methodology can be seen in Inglehart et al. (2014), but the survey interviewed a representative sample of 1,500 Ukrainians in 2011, covering the whole country within its internationally recognized borders.

It is important to exercise caution regarding the credibility of survey respondents' reports, particularly about firearms possession and safety practices. Some individuals may feel uncomfortable discussing these issues openly, resulting in potential under-reporting. Additionally, there may be over-reporting of safety practices due to a social desirability bias.

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a centre for applied knowledge dedicated to preventing and reducing illicit small arms proliferation and armed violence. The Survey informs policy and practice through a combination of data, evidence-based knowledge, authoritative resources and tools, and tailored expert advice and training, and by bringing together practitioners and policymakers.

The Survey is an associated programme of the Geneva Graduate Institute, located in Switzerland, and has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, criminology, and database and programme management. It collaborates with a network of researchers, practitioners, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

The Survey's activities and outputs are made possible through core support as well as project funding. A full list of current donors and projects can be accessed via the Small Arms Survey website.

For more information, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

About the Ukraine project

The project 'Supporting Ukraine in Addressing the Risk of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation from the Russian War of Aggression' is a joint initiative implemented with the Center for Security Studies (CENSS) and in partnership with other experts working on arms monitoring and control. It seeks to provide policymakers, practitioners, and the public with timely, relevant, and high-quality research on various aspects of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Ukraine. It does so by maintaining a baseline data set of arms seizures and produces regular publications on illicit arms, public perceptions of arms proliferation and security, and weapons proliferation and control efforts in Ukraine. It also promotes information exchange and learning on small arms proliferation matters among CENSS and a growing and inclusive network of Ukrainian practitioners, academics, and NGOs working on security issues.

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