



CRIME TRENDS AND PUBLIC

Introduction

As Ukraine continues to face the profound impacts of full-scale war, the internal security landscape has also undergone significant changes. Shifts in population, weakened state institutions, and the strain on law enforcement have created an evolving crime environment that affects both urban and rural communities. This issue of the SAM UKR Newsletter examines key crime trends across the country, the state of drug use and trafficking, and how the public perceives safety, justice, and institutional trust. Drawing on recent national and international reports, the following analysis aims to inform decision-makers, NGOs, and international observers working to support justice and governance reforms in Ukraine.

Rise in Organized Crime Amidst Conflict

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has led to weakened institutional structures and an increase in weapons proliferation, creating fertile ground for organized crime. Criminal networks have expanded their operations, engaging in activities such as arms smuggling, human trafficking, and the distribution of counterfeit goods.

Establishment of Coordination Centres: To combat the illicit arms trade, Ukraine inaugurated a Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Arms Trafficking in February 2025. This centre collaborates with international bodies like the OSCE and EUAM to enhance oversight and control over arms distribution

Crime and Patterns Across Ukraine

Domestic Violence

- Over 291,000 cases reported in 2023, a 20% increase from 2022. (Source: The Guardian)

In May, Lubov Nedoriz, a volunteer in Kharkiv, received a call from the police about a 30-year-old man who had returned from the frontline and violently attacked his mother. Once a kind and educated individual, he changed drastically after his time in combat. Domestic violence cases in Ukraine have surged, with over 291,000 reported incidents in 2023, a 20% increase from the previous year. Experts warn that these figures only reflect a portion of the issue, as wartime stress exacerbates the problem. Many women face increased domestic violence while managing households alone as more men go to war, leading to isolation and heightened vulnerability.

Ivanna Kovalchuk from the International Medical Corps notes that women are often reluctant to report domestic violence involving war veterans, sometimes even apologizing for their situation, feeling it trivial compared to the war. Massimo Diana agrees, highlighting the societal expectation to view veterans as heroes, which complicates reporting. Women may hesitate to voice their concerns, questioning their right to complain while loved ones are on the frontlines. Both Kovalchuk and Diana acknowledge that returning soldiers often suffer from PTSD, leading to changes in behavior. Diana emphasizes the need for support systems for families of veterans to address these challenges, drawing parallels to similar situations in past conflicts like those in the Balkans.

Illegal Weapons Handling

- 4,700 criminal cases related to illegal handling of weapons were initiated in 2024. (Source: fact-news.com.ua)

Organized Crime & Mafia Activity

- Organized crime has seen an uptick in war-affected areas due to weakened institutions and weapons proliferation.
- Increased smuggling networks, including those involved in arms, human trafficking, and counterfeit goods.

Arms Trafficking: From Battlefields to Black Markets

- Emergence of Heavy Weapon Trafficking:** In 2024, Ukrainian law enforcement intercepted significant quantities of heavy weaponry, including a 23mm anti-aircraft gun and U.S.-manufactured firearms. Notably, two active military personnel were implicated in these trafficking activities, indicating a shift from opportunistic theft to more organized operations.

Ukraine Launches Coordination Centre to Tackle Illegal Arms Trafficking

- Ukraine has officially launched its Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition, marking a significant step in national and European security cooperation. The inaugural meeting was chaired by Ihor Klymenko, Ukraine's Minister of Internal Affairs, and brought together high-level officials and international partners.
- Participants included representatives from Ukraine's Ministry of Defence, the National Police, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Security Service, and the State Bureau of Investigation, as well as members of the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM), OSCE, UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the European Commission.
- "Every day, our law enforcement agencies seize illegal weapons and ammunition. Establishing this centre was one of our key security priorities—not only for Ukraine, but for all of Europe," said Minister Klymenko.
- International Cooperation in Action
- Ukraine has enhanced information-sharing mechanisms with Europol, feeding data on seized, stolen, and missing firearms into European systems. It also collaborates with Spain by entering relevant data into the Schengen Information System (SIS), following EU guidelines to ensure effective cross-border arms control.
- "We're not just enforcing laws—we're contributing to a stronger European security architecture," Klymenko added.

Strong International Endorsement

- Ambassador Petr Mareš, representing the OSCE, praised the centre as a vital step in responding to growing arms trafficking threats resulting from Russia's full-scale invasion.
- "Bringing together Ukrainian law enforcement and global partners reflects a shared commitment. Only through joint efforts can we counter these complex security challenges," he said.
- UNODC's Harshet Virk confirmed that no weapons from Ukraine have been recorded as reaching the EU, a success she credited to Ukraine's vigilant and coordinated approach. She emphasized continued UN support through training and technical assistance.
- Maura O'Sullivan, Acting Head of EUAM Ukraine, described the new Coordination Centre as a dependable platform for monitoring and responding to arms trafficking. She affirmed the EU's readiness to continue cooperation, particularly in the areas of intelligence sharing and advisory support.

Corruption & White-Collar Crime

- Continued high-level corruption cases, especially involving state procurement and municipal resources.
- Investigations into embezzlement, bribery, and misuse of wartime aid remain ongoing.
- Ukrainians still view corruption as highly prevalent, even though actual encounters with it are becoming less common. According to the 2024 nationwide survey "Corruption in Ukraine: Understanding, Perception, Prevalence," 91.4% of people believe corruption is widespread, yet only 18.7% have personally experienced it in the past year.
- This gap between perception and experience isn't new. A decade ago, over 70% of Ukrainians reported facing corruption annually. That number dropped to 27% in 2020, and continues to decline. For instance, in healthcare—once one of the most corrupt sectors—nearly 70% of citizens had encountered corruption in 2014, compared to 28.5% in 2023. Education and administrative services have also seen notable improvements.
- The trend of perceiving corruption as worse than it actually is exists across many countries. A 2024 Eurobarometer survey found that over 90% of people in countries like Portugal, Croatia, and Greece believe corruption is widespread—even though actual experiences are rare. For example, only 1% of Portuguese citizens reported direct involvement with corruption, while 96% think it's a common issue.
- Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) ranks Ukraine 105th with 35 out of 100 points, while some EU countries with higher perceived corruption—like Malta or Cyprus—score significantly better.
- Experts note that public opinion is shaped by multiple influences beyond real-life experience, such as media focus on corruption scandals, limited understanding of legal definitions, and misinformation. This explains why perception often doesn't reflect the actual scope of the problem.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Human smuggling also rose due to the war, especially for non-EU residents fleeing Ukraine and for Ukrainian men trying to avoid military service. Smuggling routes into and through Ukraine have shifted, affecting migrants from places like Afghanistan and Syria.

Before and during the war, organized crime in Ukraine has expanded, with groups involved in extortion, especially in sectors like mining. Police have found and acted against several such gangs.

Before the onset of the full-scale war in 2022, Ukraine grappled with a significant organized crime presence, deeply embedded in various sectors of its economy and governance.

Organized Crime Landscape Pre-2022

- **Number of Criminal Groups:** In 2006, Ukrainian authorities identified 466 organized crime groups (OGs) and criminal associations (CAs). By 2015, this number had decreased to 166, indicating a reduction over the decade.
- **Criminal Leadership:** Approximately 40 influential crime bosses, known as *vory-v-zakone* or "thieves-in-law," operated within Ukraine. Many of these figures resided abroad but maintained control over domestic criminal activities.

Crime Rate: Ukraine's overall crime rate peaked in 2000, followed by a decline until 2009. In 2019, the murder rate stood at 3.4 per 100,000 population, higher than several European counterparts.

Law Enforcement and Anti-Crime Measures

- **Judicial Actions:** In 2022, the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) prosecuted 80 individuals associated with organized crime groups, uncovering losses exceeding UAH 137 million. ([dbr.gov.ua](#))
- **International Collaboration:** Ukraine enhanced cooperation with entities like Europol and the OSCE to combat transnational organized crime, focusing on information sharing and joint operations.

Despite these efforts, organized crime remained a persistent challenge in Ukraine, with deep-rooted networks exploiting economic vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses.

People

Ukraine is a key country in human trafficking, acting as a source, transit, and destination. Ukrainians, especially women and children, are trafficked for sex and forced labour in Europe and the Middle East. The war with Russia has made the problem worse, increasing vulnerability among refugees. Russian troops are also reportedly involved, and children from occupied areas have been taken to Russia.

Human trafficking in Ukraine has intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, with the war exacerbating vulnerabilities among displaced populations and creating new opportunities for exploitation. Here's an overview of the current situation:

Human Trafficking Cases Since 2022

- 264 criminal offenses related to human trafficking were registered in Ukraine from February 24, 2022, to October 2023. Authorities issued suspicion notices to 169 individuals, dismantled six organized trafficking groups, and officially recognized 215 victims, including 23 children.
- In 2024, 121 Ukrainians were granted official victim status: 66 men, 45 women, and 10 children. The majority were victims of internal trafficking, often linked to labor exploitation.
- The Global Slavery Index estimated that in 2021, prior to the invasion, 559,000 people in Ukraine were living in modern slavery. This figure likely underrepresents the current situation, as the war has increased risks and reduced detection capabilities.



TRADE

Ukraine has become one of Europe's biggest hubs for arms trafficking, with a large supply of weapons available both legally and illegally. The situation worsened after the 2014 conflict and has escalated with the current war, especially due to widespread access to weapons and international military aid. Most trafficked weapons are old Soviet models, but newer ones are also entering circulation. Though exact numbers are unclear, illegal firearms are increasingly linked to crimes in Ukraine and neighboring Russia.

Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has experienced a significant proliferation of unregistered firearms among its civilian population. Here's an overview of the current situation and the government's efforts to address it:

Proliferation of Unregistered Weapons

- **Estimated Numbers:** Ukrainian authorities estimate that civilians possess between **2 to 5 million** unregistered firearms. These weapons primarily originate from distributions during the early stages of the war and from battlefield recoveries.

Loss and Theft: Since the beginning of the full-scale war, over **270,000 firearms** have been reported lost or stolen. The majority of these incidents have occurred in frontline regions such as Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kyiv.

Government Measures for Weapon Control

- **Legislative Actions:** In August 2024, the Ukrainian parliament passed legislation requiring civilians to declare or surrender unregistered firearms within 90 days following the end of martial law. This law aims to prevent illegal arms from fueling organized crime and to enhance public safety. (TASS)
- **Weapon Declaration Initiative:** Starting November 25, 2024, civilians were encouraged to declare their firearms. Within the first week, approximately 300 firearms and 10,000 rounds of ammunition were registered. However, this number represents a small fraction of the estimated unregistered weapons. (Українські Національні Новини (УНН))

Unified Weapons Registry: Launched in June 2023, the **Unified Register of Weapons** allows citizens to apply for weapon permits and declare firearms through an online platform integrated with the Diia app. By December 2023, over **137,000 permits** had been issued.

Challenges and Concerns

Counterfeit goods like clothes, jewelry, and perfumes—mainly from Asia—are widely sold in Ukraine. The war, weak enforcement of intellectual property laws, and social acceptance have allowed this black market to thrive, although some key distribution centers, like those near Odesa, have shut down due to the conflict.

Ukraine is also a key route for smuggling tobacco into Europe and is now becoming a destination for it too, driven by inflation and rising taxes. Smuggling routes have shifted away from Russia and Belarus toward countries like Poland, Romania, and Moldova. Additionally, a temporary wartime alcohol ban boosted the illegal alcohol trade until the restriction was lifted.

Ukraine functions both as a **source** and a **transit hub** for illicit tobacco products entering Europe.

Ukraine as a Source of Illicit Tobacco

Between 2015 and 2021, Ukraine was among the largest Eastern European sources of counterfeit and contraband cigarettes in the EU market. In 2022, millions of packs of Ukrainian cigarettes were smuggled into the EU, with significant increases noted compared to previous years.

The illicit tobacco trade has led to substantial revenue losses for Ukraine, amounting to as much as UAH 20.5 billion in unpaid or underpaid taxes in 2022 alone

Ukraine as a Transit Hub

Ukraine also serves as a transit point for illicit tobacco products being trafficked into Europe. Smugglers have used various methods, including freight and passenger trains, air passengers' luggage, postal shipments, drones, helicopters, small planes, and even diplomatic vehicles to move contraband cigarettes across borders. (The Organized Crime Index, ResearchGate)

The Transcarpathia region, sharing borders with four EU countries—Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania—has been a hotspot for such activities. However, since 2022, Ukraine's war effort, EU border controls, and heightened scrutiny have disrupted these flows. (Global Initiative, Global Initiative)

Recent Developments

In response to the growing problem, Ukraine has intensified its fight against the illicit tobacco trade. The government has dismantled at least six illegal cigarette factories, which were found to be well-equipped operations.

This case comes shortly after a major raid in Chernivtsi Oblast, where the ESBU and National Police uncovered another large-scale illegal tobacco production network. In the Kyiv Oblast case alone, 437,500 counterfeit cigarette packs were seized—valued at approximately 60 million hryvnias (\$1.4 million)—along with 225 rolls of packaging tape, 70 boxes of wrappers, and tobacco-mixing equipment.

DRUG USE IN UKRAINE

Briefing Slide: Disruption of Opioid Treatment in Ukraine Due to War

Background:

- Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (since 2014, escalated in 2022) has severely impacted access to drug treatment, especially for opioid use disorder.
- Ukraine has the highest HIV prevalence in Europe, making access to safe treatment crucial.

Key Findings (Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 2024):

- Only 20% of patients in Russian-occupied areas were successfully transferred to treatment sites in safer Ukrainian regions.
- Less than 50% of transferred patients remained in care by 2021.
- Patients receiving higher or flexible doses were more likely to stick with their treatment.
- **Key Data and Trends:**
- **Injection Drug Use:** Approximately **320,000 adults** in Ukraine inject heroin, accounting for about **0.7%** of the population)
- **Prevalence Rate:** In 2022, the prevalence of narcotic and psychotropic substance use was reported at **17 per 10,000** individuals, with a consistent annual increase observed from 2015 to 2022 .
- **Survey Findings:** A survey by the Institute of Psychiatry revealed that **63.7%** of respondents had used drugs at least once, with higher usage among men (**81.2%**) compared to women (**50.3%**). The most affected age group was **25–34 years**, primarily using drugs for experimentation or stress relief.
- **Youth Drug Use:** Data from 2010 indicated that **9%** of individuals aged 15–34 had tried illicit drugs, predominantly marijuana or hashish. Among vocational students aged 15–21, **17%** reported having used drugs at least once.
- **These figures underscore the growing challenge of drug use in Ukraine, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict and associated societal stresses.**

Production & Trafficking

- Closure of maritime routes has redirected trafficking through land borders with Moldova, Romania, and Poland.
- Increase in home-based and small-scale synthetic drug labs, particularly in urban centers.

- **Major Drug Lab Seizures in Ukraine (2023–2024)**

- *Kyiv Region*
- **April 2024:** Authorities dismantled four drug laboratories producing amphetamine and its precursors. The labs had a combined capacity to produce over 50 kg of precursors monthly, yielding approximately 40 kg of amphetamine. The estimated monthly income from these operations was over UAH 16 million. Seized items included nearly 400 liters of nitroethane, 25 kg of various precursors, more than 3,000 MDMA pills, and weapons.
- *Khmelnyskyi*
- **November 2024:** Police uncovered a large-scale drug lab operated by a Kyiv resident and eight accomplices. The lab produced 1–3 kg of methadone and amphetamine daily, generating monthly profits of about UAH 5 million. The drugs were distributed through "bookmarks" in Khmelnytskyi and Kyiv regions

Cherkasy Region

- **December 2024:** Two drug laboratories producing Alpha-PVP and amphetamine were exposed. Law enforcement seized drugs worth UAH 3 million and detained five suspects. The group sold drugs via Telegram channels, using postal services and cryptocurrency for transactions.

Vinnysia Region

July 2024: A powerful drug lab producing 10 kg of amphetamine per month was dismantled. The operation, managed by a Kyiv resident and five accomplices, generated millions in revenue. Seized items included amphetamine, cannabis, precursors, laboratory

Chernihiv Region

- **June 2024:** Law enforcement neutralized a drug lab at an agricultural base, seizing over 80 kg of narcotic substances valued at more than UAH 150 million. The lab was linked to an international drug syndicate and produced mephedrone, salts, and MDMA.

National Operations

- **January 2024:** The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and National Police dismantled five drug labs across Kyiv, Dnipro, Odesa, Cherkasy, and Sumy regions. The labs produced over 80 kg of drugs monthly, including amphetamine, α-PVP, mephedrone, and cannabis, with an estimated monthly value exceeding UAH 40 million. Nineteen individuals were detained, and significant quantities of drugs, weapons, and ammunition were seized.

MEDICAL CANNABIS

- Legalized in August 2024 for conditions like cancer and epilepsy, with proposed expansion to PTSD treatment. (Source: Le Monde)
- Substance use among Ukrainian soldiers stems from a mix of physical pain, trauma, prior addiction, and the pressures of war. While alcohol is the most commonly used substance, cannabis, anti-anxiety meds, painkillers, amphetamines, and synthetic stimulants are also widespread. Some troops already had addictions, while others develop them during service. Painkillers like nalbuphine can cause quick and severe dependency, while others use drugs to unwind off-duty.
- Ukraine’s military enforces a strict zero-tolerance drug policy, punishing even those using methadone for opioid treatment. This leads to secrecy and reluctance to seek help, increasing long-term risks. Drugs reach soldiers through various sources, including informal networks, family, volunteers, and even criminal groups. Telegram-based orders and inconsistent enforcement also contribute to the problem.
- Though some government bodies acknowledge the issue, it’s still missing from official veterans' policy. Experts urge reforms that focus on support instead of punishment—such as legal OST access in the army, confidential treatment options, better pharmacy services, and stronger data on drug use.

Public Perceptions of Crime

Corruption Perception

- 91.4% of Ukrainians believe corruption is widespread; however, only 18.7% report direct experiences. (Source: NACP, 2024)
- Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index score for Ukraine is 35/100, ranking 105th globally. (Source: CPI Ukraine)

Trust in Law Enforcement and Justice System

- National Guard: 86% of Ukrainians report high levels of trust (2024).
- Security Service of Ukraine (SBU): Trusted by 73% of respondents.
- Judiciary & Prosecution: Only 12% trust courts and 9% trust prosecutors. (Source: KIIS, EUAM)

Regional and Demographic Insights

- Frontline areas express high distrust in civilian police and justice services due to occupation legacies.
- Rural populations often feel neglected by official services, depending on informal or community mechanisms.
- Urban populations are more concerned with cybercrime, bribery in state institutions, and safety in public spaces.
- Civic Initiatives and Responses
- Rise in anti-corruption platforms, reporting apps, and hotline usage.
- Community self-defense units and veteran-led patrols are gaining popularity as trust in local policing wavers.
- Corruption remains Ukraine’s second biggest issue after Russia’s military aggression, according to 2024 survey data. Around 79% of citizens and 76% of businesses see it as a major problem. Yet only 18.7% of citizens and 23.2% of businesses actually experienced corruption in the past year.
- These findings come from the nationwide study “Corruption in Ukraine 2024,” conducted by Info Sapiens for the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP). The agency notes that high corruption perception is common across Europe, with countries like Malta, Cyprus, and Greece reporting even higher levels than Ukraine.
- Despite challenges linked to the war, public attitudes are shifting. A record 58% of Ukrainians now oppose corruption and are willing to report it—up from 43% in 2017. Reporting rates have also reached new highs: 17.2% among businesses and 9.7% among citizens, compared to just 3.3% in 2020.
- Corruption is most commonly encountered in sectors like construction, land services, healthcare, and law enforcement. Businesses additionally point to customs, utilities, and law enforcement as the most problematic areas.
- These insights will help shape Ukraine’s upcoming Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2026–2030.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Key Takeaways

- The war has significantly increased the risk of human trafficking in Ukraine, particularly among women, children, and displaced individuals.
- While official statistics provide some insight, many cases likely go unreported due to the chaos of war and the clandestine nature of trafficking.
- Ongoing efforts by the Ukrainian government and international partners are crucial in combating trafficking and supporting victims.
- Crime Trends and Public Perception in Ukraine – At a Glance

While official statistics suggest a decline in crime since 2022, especially violent crime, concerns persist over unreported cases—particularly domestic violence, petty theft, and corruption. Urban centers like Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa report higher drug-related and property crimes. However, many Ukrainians perceive crime as increasing, influenced more by personal experiences and media than by data. This gap highlights the need for better reporting systems and public engagement with law enforcement.

Trust in Institutions:

Surveys reveal varying levels of public trust in state institutions:EUAM Ukraine

- High Trust:
 - Armed Forces of Ukraine: 91.5%
- State Emergency Service: 83%
- National Guard: 74%
- Volunteer organizations: 80%

Moderate Trust:

- National Police: 50%
 - President of Ukraine: 48.5%
 - Low Trust:
 - Judiciary: 25%
 - Political parties: 26.5%
 - Verkhovna Rada (Parliament): 35%
- Source: Razumkov Centre, September 2024 survey

Crime Trends and Public Perception in Ukraine

Crime in Ukraine today is both a symptom and a consequence of ongoing war and instability. Domestic violence, synthetic drug use, and organized crime have become more pronounced, while illegal weapons circulation threatens long-term public safety. Regional disparities highlight the need for decentralized responses and targeted institutional support.

Despite low trust in judicial institutions, public confidence in military and national security structures remains high. Civic participation in community safety initiatives and anti-corruption efforts continues to grow. Moving forward, comprehensive reforms in law enforcement, judicial transparency, and drug policy will be essential for building long-term resilience and trust in public institutions.

Crime Trends and Public Perception in Ukraine – 2021–2024 Overview

Crime Patterns:

Official statistics indicate a decline in overall crime rates since 2022. However, underreporting remains a concern, particularly for domestic violence, petty theft, and corruption. Urban centers such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa have reported higher instances

of drug-related and property crimes.

Public Perception:

Despite the reported decrease in crime, many Ukrainians perceive an increase, influenced

by media coverage and personal experiences. This disparity underscores the need for improved transparency and public engagement by law enforcement agencies.

For further inquiries, insights, or collaboration opportunities, please visit our website or reach out directly:

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