

Guns in the Family

MAFIA VIOLENCE IN ITALY

Italian mafias have always used armed violence and intimidation to solve disputes, assail their competitors, enhance their reputation, and acquire privileged positions in the legal and illegal markets in which they operate. The professionalized use of firearms and explosives thus represents a characteristic feature of these groups.

This chapter presents original research on patterns, rules, changes, and variations in the use of firearms violence employed by traditional mafia-type groups across Italy during the past 20 years, focusing specifically on the four main organizations: the Cosa Nostra in Sicily, the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria, the Camorra in Campania (including Naples), and the Sacra Corona Unita (SCU) in Apulia.

Although a violent reputation and the credible threat of the use of violence often grant criminal groups a powerful monopoly over legal and illegal markets, the outcomes of this research show that mafia groups tend to make 'economical' use of violence. Indeed, armed violence is often employed as a last resort when less risky strategies are not viable. Depending on the situation, *mafiosi* use different degrees of violence, ranging from a simple threat, or an act of intimidation, to the infliction of injuries or the commission of homicide.

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Members expressly chosen for their abilities in the use of violence compose units called *gruppi di fuoco* (fire groups), which are in charge of carrying out a wide array of violent acts, ranging from physical assaults to killings, although homicides are by far the most frequent. Fire groups contain as many as six or seven people who may eventually operate as 'commandos', sometimes without even knowing the target they are meant to hit.

In the past 20 years, mafia homicides rates have been irregular. While the number of homicides peaked in 1992, with 340 mafia-related deaths nationally, it began a general decline by the late 1990s, although 203 mafia homicides were recorded in 2004, with the Camorra accounting for more than half of those deaths. By 2010, the number had dropped to 69 mafia homicides (see Table 4.1).



Cosa Nostra boss Bernardo Provenzano enters a police building in Palermo, escorted by hooded police officers, April 2006. © Luca Bruno/AP Photo

Table 4.1 Mafia homicides in Italy, by group, 1992–2010

Year	Cosa Nostra	'Ndrangheta	Camorra	SCU	Total
1992	152	53	126	9	340
1993	53	41	59	5	158
1994	83	34	60	4	181
1995	95	38	131	17	281
1996	90	45	138	11	284
1997	48	43	135	21	247
1998	51	28	131	34	244
1999	39	33	80	29	181
2000	17	45	86	26	174
2001	31	39	68	25	163
2002	18	30	54	23	125
2003	13	33	77	37	160
2004	17	45	122	19	203
2005	18	42	72	7	139
2006	14	23	77	8	122
2007	12	16	85	4	117
2008	12	22	59	9	102
2009	19	11	49	7	86
2010	10	24	18	15	67
Totals	792	645	1,627	310	3,374

Mafiosi generally use 7.65 mm firearms, as well as AK-pattern assault rifles and 9 × 21 mm pistols, although they even use World War II-era firearms or modified toy guns. The choice of weapon is driven by pragmatism and weapons are usually destroyed after the commission of a crime.

Mafia groups procure firearms through robberies from firearms shops, the military, police forces, and private citizens as well as via exchanges for drugs and other illicit commodities. Italian criminal organizations—and especially the 'Ndrangheta—appear to be active as traffickers, buyers, and intermediaries in the international firearms trade. This involvement seems partly due to the geographical proximity to the former Yugoslavia and Albania, which, since the end of the conflicts of the 1990s, has allowed domestic criminal groups to buy weapons at relatively low prices.

While important strides have been made in understanding patterns of firearms acquisition, possession, and storage, as well as mafia groups' deployment of firearms violence, quantitative data remains weak and further research of firearms-related crimes in Italy is clearly needed. ■

Although Calabria experienced the highest rate of mafia homicides in 2010—1.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, while the national average was 0.1—the Camorra is the mafia group most associated with indifference to the general rule of parsimony in the use of violence, a guideline generally observed by the Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta. Between 1980 and 2008, the Camorra committed an estimated 3,500 homicides.

The significant decline of mafia homicides during the past few years (a 43 per cent drop from 2007 to 2010) may be linked to ad hoc strategies carried out by organized crime groups that have entered a submersion phase and are moving further into legal markets and business operations. But emerging trends, such as the latest Camorra *faida* (feud) that erupted in 2012 or the return of mafia homicides in Palermo, indicate that the use of armed violence remains a viable option for these groups.

While quantitative data on firearms-related crimes remains weak, this chapter sheds some light on firearms acquisition, storage, and use by these groups, suggesting that the availability of large arsenals and sophisticated weaponry as well as the reliance on fire groups are crucial for maintaining mafia power. Most mafia clans tend to maintain their own arsenals of collectively held firearms, with selected members in charge of procuring, storing, maintaining, and distributing firearms in response to requests or circumstances. Arsenals are often discovered in rural areas, close to old houses, inside farm stalls, behind double walls, in bunkers, or in underground caches or wooden boxes. Some of these arsenals comprise old firearms that have been in storage for years, while others are filled with more sophisticated weapons, including AK-pattern rifles, machine guns, pistols, hand grenades, and anti-tank rocket launchers.