

THE EVOLUTION OF HOMICIDES RECORDED IN BUCHAREST BETWEEN 2020 AND 2024 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

RADU GAVRIȘ¹

ABSTRACT

The article analyses the evolution of murders recorded in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024, correlated with the period of movement restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only homicides and attempted homicides (Articles 188 and 189 of the New Criminal Code, Article 32 in relation to Articles 188 and 189 of the New Criminal Code) are included in the analysis. Statistical data from the General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police (GIRP) and the Homicide Department of the Bucharest Police Directorate (DGPMB) were analysed. The analysis showed a slight decrease in the number of murders and attempted murders during the period of traffic restrictions, followed by a much more pronounced decrease in the post-restriction period.

Keywords: murder, attempted murder, Bucharest, COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, homicides have been on a downward trend in recent years. According to the “Global Study on Homicide 2011–2023” published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the global homicide rate in 2010 was approximately 6.9 per 100,000 inhabitants (UNODC 2011, 9), in 2015 the global average was 5.9 (UNODC 2023, 10), in 2017 it rose to 6.1 (UNODC 2019, 11), and in 2021 it fell to 5.8 per 100,000 inhabitants (UNODC 2023, 45). The overall trend remains one of slow decline worldwide.

In Europe, the number of murders committed is well below the global average, being less than half of it. The homicide rate on the European continent in 2010 was approximately 3.5 per 100,000 inhabitants (UNODC 2011, 21), with the

¹ Ph D student at the School of Advanced Studies of the Romanian Academy (SCOSAAR), Doctoral School of Sociology and Legal Sciences, E-mail address: gavris_r@yahoo.com.



average remaining at the same level of 3.5 in 2015 (UNODC 2023, 10). In 2017, it fell to 3.0 (UNODC 2019, 11), and in 2021 it will fall to 2.2 per 100,000 inhabitants (UNODC 2023, 10). In Europe, the decline is more pronounced than at the global level.

The 2023 UNODC report states that “the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicides varied from country to country” (UNODC 2023, 48), and in Europe the fluctuations were within the normal range of trends over the last decade (UNODC 2023, 64). International studies on the effect of movement restrictions imposed by authorities during the pandemic on the commission of homicides have reached varying conclusions. A study conducted in the US, which centralised 46 studies on crime during the pandemic, concluded that “homicides and cybercrime (...) did not change significantly as a result of COVID-19 restrictions” (Hoeboer *et al.* 2023, 274). It also concludes that there is no clear evidence to support the theory that “the reduction in crime rates in public places has led to a constant increase in crime rates in private contexts (partner violence and domestic violence)” (Hoeboer *et al.* 2023, 297), drawing attention to the importance of continuing research in order to gain a clear picture of the effects of movement restrictions and the Covid pandemic in general. A study analysing the evolution of homicides in Mexico City neighbourhoods during the pandemic reaches a similar conclusion, finding “no evidence that virus containment measures moderated the relationship between community tensions and changes in homicide rates” (Vilalta *et al.* 2022, 1).

In contrast, a medico-legal study on the causes of death, conducted by the Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology at the University Clinical Centre in Kragujevac, Serbia, shows that “the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on violent deaths in the Šumadija region (Central Serbia), with an overall increase in the number of violent deaths and a major impact on deaths caused by domestic violence” (Andric 2024, 1).

A study involving the evaluation of 825 autopsy reports from the Leipzig Institute of Legal Medicine carried out in 2020 (Keimling 2022, 112) aimed to establish the existence of any “links to the Covid-19 pandemic” (*ibid.*). The result shows that “5 out of 72 suicides (6.94%) and 1 out of 14 homicides (7.14%) were motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic” (*ibid.*). It should be noted that this study included research conducted by law enforcement authorities and statistics on causes of death between 2015 and 2020 (*ibid.*).

Covering mainly the pre-pandemic period, a study on homicides and suicides conducted at the Institute of Legal Medicine in Milan, using the results of autopsies performed at this institution, also compared the number of such cases recorded in 2019 with those in 2021 (Calati *et al.* 2023, 1). The study covered a longer period – 2015–2021 – which provided an important reference base for the results obtained (*ibid.*). Its conclusion shows that “it is possible to cautiously hypothesise a normalisation of trends as time passes since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Calati *et al.* 2023, 1).

Other studies also cover the post-pandemic period, comparing the evolution of homicides both during the restrictions and in the period after them. A study conducted in Bangladesh on the evolution of homicides and rapes during the quarantine and post-quarantine periods shows that “homicides increased substantially (9.5%) during the quarantine and decreased marginally (3.0%) afterwards” (Zobraj 2023, 1). There was a very different trend in the case of rapes, where the number “decreased considerably (34.3%) during the lockdown, but increased significantly (13.9%) in the post-pandemic period after the lockdown” (Zobraj 2023, 1). The study concludes by pointing to the need for further research to highlight the causes of the different trends in rape.

It is quite clear that “the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicides varied from country to country” (UNODC 2023, 48), and research needs to be deepened to accurately assess the impact of the pandemic context on crime trends.

HOMICIDES COMMITTED IN ROMANIA DURING THE PANDEMIC

According to statistical data on the main activities carried out by the Romanian Police (IGPR 2017–2024), in Romania, the number of homicides has fallen steadily in recent years, from 246 in 2017 to 150 in 2024 (–39.02%). The same trend was observed in the case of attempted murders, from 384 in 2017 to 232 in 2024 (–39.58%).

If we look at the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants, the decrease is from 1.29 to 0.78 homicides/100,000 (Figure 1).

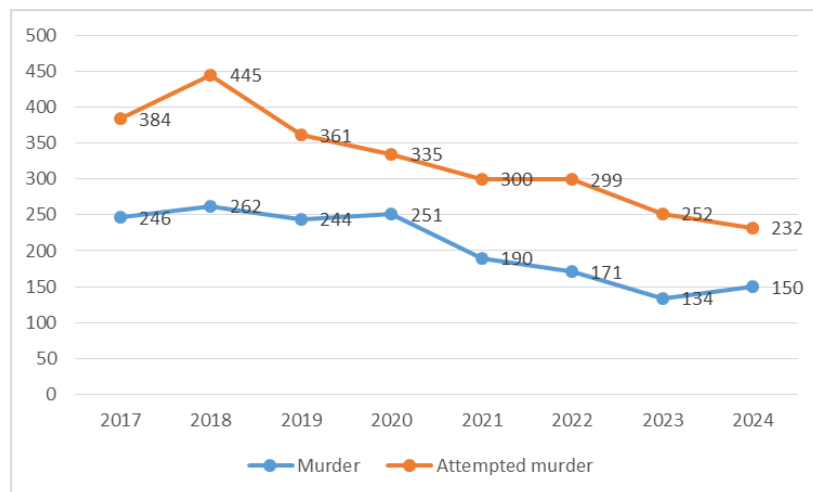


Figure 1. Statistics on murders and attempted murders recorded in Romania between 2017 and 2024.

Source: IGPR – Statistics on the main activities carried out by the Romanian Police between 2017 and 2024, INS – Final results of the 2021 population and housing census.

The statistics clearly show an almost constant downward trend in murders and attempted murders in Romania, even though there have been occasional small increases from one year to the next.

RESTRICTIONS CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, various restrictions on movement were imposed in Romania between 2020 and 2022. They began on 15 March 2020 (Presidential Decree No. 195/2020, subsequently approved by Parliament) with the declaration of a state of emergency. This allowed for the adoption of “military ordinances” imposing: movement restrictions, home quarantine, mandatory wearing of protective masks, school closures and other limitations on the right to free movement. This ended on 15 May 2020, continuing with a state of alert.

The state of alert (established under Law 55/2020) involved a gradual relaxation of restrictions, with home quarantine remaining in place for people arriving from areas with high transmission rates. Restrictions such as night-time traffic bans (in some counties), restrictions on economic activities and public gatherings remained in place. The state of alert was extended periodically (every 30 days) by Government Decisions, maintaining certain restrictions adapted to the epidemiological situation. By autumn 2020, some restrictions had been lifted for restaurants (limited capacity), schools (mixed scenarios: online and face-to-face), public events (limited number of participants), etc. The measures were adjusted locally, depending on the incidence of COVID-19 cases in each county.

On 8 March 2022, at midnight, the state of alert ended and was not extended, leading to the lifting of all restrictions that were in place.

PROTECTIVE MEASURES PROVIDED BY ROMANIAN LAW IN CASES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence can lead, especially in cases where the authorities do not take measures to combat these manifestations and protect victims, to a significant number of murders and attempted murders within the family.

In Romania, legislation has evolved slowly. In 2003, Law No. 217 of 22 May 2003 on the prevention and combating of domestic violence was adopted, which did not provide legal instruments such as protection orders, as the normative act reiterated the possible protection measures offered by the Code of Criminal Procedure (procedures that take time and can only be implemented within the framework provided by the investigation of a criminal case). Nine years later, Law No. 25 of 9 March 2012 amending and supplementing Law No. 217/2003

on preventing and combating domestic violence introduced the protection order (PO) (Art. 27), through which the court could order measures to protect victims and restrict the activities of the aggressor – including “the temporary removal of the aggressor from the family home, obliging the aggressor to undergo psychological counselling, or to undergo treatment or forms of care, in particular for the purpose of detoxification.” (Art. 27). The procedure was no longer conditional on the existence of a criminal case, but took almost as long, as it was also ordered by the court.

After another six years, Law No. 174 of 13 July 2018 amending and supplementing Law No. 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence introduced the provisional protection order (Article 32), an act issued by the police officers notified, which had immediate effect. At the same time, the police officer could also order the aggressor to wear an “electronic surveillance system” (*ibid.*). The implementation of this last provision was delayed, mainly due to the technical requirements that had to be met.

In 2021, Law No. 146 of 17 May 2021 on electronic monitoring in judicial and criminal enforcement proceedings created the necessary legislative framework for the implementation of the *Electronic Monitoring Information System* (SIME), with the technical rules being approved in 2022 (Government Decision No. 1,025 of 10 August 2022), and implementation began in Bucharest and three other counties on 1 October 2022, extending to two other stages, with the deadline for completion of implementation at national level being 31 December 2025.

In conclusion, while the protection order was a measure implemented well in advance, the temporary protection order came into force almost a year and six months after the start of the pandemic. Its impact on reducing the effects of domestic violence – and implicitly murders – during the Covid-19 restrictions is a subject that cannot be overlooked. Electronic monitoring, on the other hand, was introduced into the prevention activities carried out by the police after the period of movement restrictions, in three successive stages, and is still in the early stages of use as a means of prevention. In order to accurately assess its effectiveness, it will be necessary to analyse a longer period of time during which this measure has been applied.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to analyse statistical data on homicides committed in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024, in the context of traffic restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The crimes analysed were selected so that they are similar in terms of the decision taken and implemented by the perpetrator. The aim is not to analyse the evolution of crimes based on different decisions, as the factors that led to those decisions are likely to be different in nature. For example, a person

who commits a fatal assault (Art. 195 NCP) makes the decision to hit their victim, not to kill them. The victim's death is due to an accident (or a series of accidents) that the perpetrator did not intend: the victim trips, falls, hits their head on a blunt object, and this injury proves fatal. In contrast, a person who commits murder (Art. 188 NCP) makes the decision to kill their victim, and the weapon used and the manner of action are chosen to carry out the decision. Thus, the results are identical, but the decisions made by the perpetrators – and implicitly the factors that contributed to those decisions – are different.

Thus, for the present study, only the offences of murder (including attempted murder) provided for in Articles 188 and 189 NCP, Article 32 in relation to Articles 188 and 189 NCP, were selected from the legal range of offences against life. Title I “Offences against the person” – Chapter I “Offences against life” of the New Criminal Code (NCP) contains several offences grouped in Articles 188–192, namely: murder (including attempted murder), aggravated murder (including attempted murder), killing at the request of the victim, incitement or facilitation of suicide, and manslaughter.

The analysis proposed in this article aims to present the situation of homicides committed in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024 and to show how the movement restrictions imposed by quarantine have influenced their frequency. We chose to include only homicides and attempted homicides in the analysis for several reasons. In the case of murder, the central elements are therefore the perpetrator (the aggressor) and the risk factors that favour the commission of murder, with pandemic restrictions overlapping these. The perpetrator – under the influence of risk factors – decides to kill the victim and takes concrete action. In legal terms, this is the intent to kill, which is found in cases of murder, aggravated murder, attempted murder and aggravated attempted murder. The other offences in the chapter on “offences against life” have complex forms of guilt (killing at the victim's request) or another form of guilt – negligence, or mistake in everyday language – manslaughter.

Offences in the other chapters of the Criminal Code that result in the death of the victim – Chapter II “Offences against bodily integrity, assault or health”: assault or injury causing death (Art. 195 NCP) and fighting followed by the death of one or more persons (Art. 198 para. 3 NCP), Chapter III “Offences committed against a family member”: killing of a newborn by the mother (Art. 200 NCP), Chapter IV “Assaults on the foetus”: termination of pregnancy followed by the death of the pregnant woman (Art. 201 NCP) and injury to the foetus resulting in the death of the child (Art. 202 NCP), Chapter VI “Offences against personal freedom”: unlawful deprivation of liberty resulting in the death of the victim (Art. 205 NCP), Chapter VIII “Offences against sexual freedom and integrity”: rape and sexual assault followed by the death of the victim (Art. 218–219 NCP) as well as Title II “Offences against property” – Chapter II “Robbery and piracy”: robbery or piracy followed by the death of the victim (Art. 236 NCP) - are committed with

“excessive intent” (or *praeterintentio*), i.e. the perpetrator intended to commit a crime, but due to circumstances, the victim’s death occurred. For example, a fatal blow (Art. 195 NCP) occurs when the perpetrator punches the victim, who falls, hits their head on a hard surface and dies as a result of this subsequent impact. The perpetrator did not make the decision to kill someone and did not take action that directly caused the victim’s death. The decision made and carried out is different from that of a murderer, and obviously the risk factors that led to it are different.

In contrast, attempted murder is based on the same decision – to kill someone – the only difference being that the result does not occur for reasons beyond the perpetrator’s control. The analysis of risk factors focuses on **the decision to kill**, which was contributed to by the perpetrator and must obviously be similar in all selected cases.

Consequently, in this study, I have chosen to analyse the statistical evolution of murders and attempted murders, but for the sake of clarity, I will use the term murder, which encompasses the four selected offences (murder, aggravated murder, attempted murder and attempted aggravated murder).

The purpose of this study was to analyse how homicide offences evolved during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. The main research questions I sought to answer were: Was the evolution of the number of homicides influenced by the restrictions imposed by the authorities during the pandemic? What was the trend in homicides in the post-restriction period? Are there differences between how the number of homicides evolved at the international, national and local (Bucharest) levels?

The corpus analysed included: statistical data on homicides, attempted homicides, aggravated homicides and attempted aggravated homicides. The statistical data included in the analysis were extracted from the official statistics of institutions involved in investigating homicide cases: 1) the Romanian Police (data on the main activities carried out by the Romanian Police 2020–2024 (available on the Romanian Police website); 2) The Prosecutor’s Office attached to the Bucharest Tribunal and 3) The Homicide Service within the General Directorate of the Bucharest Municipal Police (Statistical situation of violent crimes committed in the municipality of Bucharest). The statistics used for this study are represented by the annual statistics compiled by these institutions and other data they hold in their records.

This analysis also included murders with unknown perpetrators (A.N.) as well as those followed by the perpetrator’s suicide, but some clarifications should be made in order to understand these concepts as they are used by law enforcement agencies in Romania.

Murders with unknown perpetrators (with AN) are those murders where the perpetrator is unknown when the crime is reported to the authorities responsible for investigating it (the police, the public prosecutor’s office). As the investigation progresses and the evidence is gathered, the perpetrator is identified and the

criminal investigation measures provided for by law are taken. Thus, some of these murders were considered to be with unknown perpetrators in the first part of their investigation, until the perpetrator was identified. During the period analysed, there were no murders classified as AN, even though some were reported without the perpetrator being known.

Murders followed by suicide are also included in the analysis because they are included as any other murder in the authorities' statistics. Although they may seem to be clear-cut events, beyond doubt, they are (or should be) treated with caution. The case is opened to prove that the perpetrator killed the victim, even if the perpetrator has died. This eliminates the possibility of staging – for example, a double murder in which the perpetrator “arranges” the scene to suggest a murder followed by the perpetrator's suicide. Between 2020 and 2024, nine such incidents were recorded in Bucharest, which were included in this analysis.

These were analysed through annual comparisons and time series of murders committed during periods of restrictions and post-restrictions, and are represented in graphs.

In order to have a basis for comparison, statistics were obtained on violent crimes committed in Bucharest between 1990 and 2024, and the last 15 years (2010–2024) were selected.

Why was Bucharest chosen? Because 1,716,961 of the country's 19,053,815 inhabitants live in the Romanian capital (INS 2021), without counting people living with no valid residence permits, workers employed in Bucharest, tourists, etc. Unverified estimates put the actual population of Bucharest at around 3.5–4 million inhabitants (Bucharest Municipal Police Directorate (DGPMB), Assessment of activities carried out in 2024). By comparison, the next largest city in Romania in terms of population is Cluj-Napoca, with 286,598 inhabitants (INS 2021). Bucharest is also home to the main state institutions, diplomatic representations and many other economic and financial objectives; all these bodies pose multiple challenges, including for law enforcement agencies.

In terms of crime, 14% of all crimes reported in Romania and 23% of street crimes are reported in Bucharest (DGPMB 2024), making it an important benchmark for the level of safety across the country.

Limitations of the analysis: Public institutions that investigate crimes and record crime data in Romania (the Romanian Police, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of Justice) have data recorded with considerable accuracy in the area of violent crimes, but they take into account the date on which the murders are recorded in the records and not the date on which the murder was committed (thus, a murder may be committed in one year and reported, denounced or discovered many years after it was committed). Consequently, there may be small differences between the number of murders committed and the number recorded, but this difference occurs in all years and at a relatively similar rate.

RESULTS

The statistical situation of homicides committed in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024 must be analysed in the context of the evolution of these crimes over a period of time that constitutes a reference base. Thus, over the last 15 years, the situation is as follows:

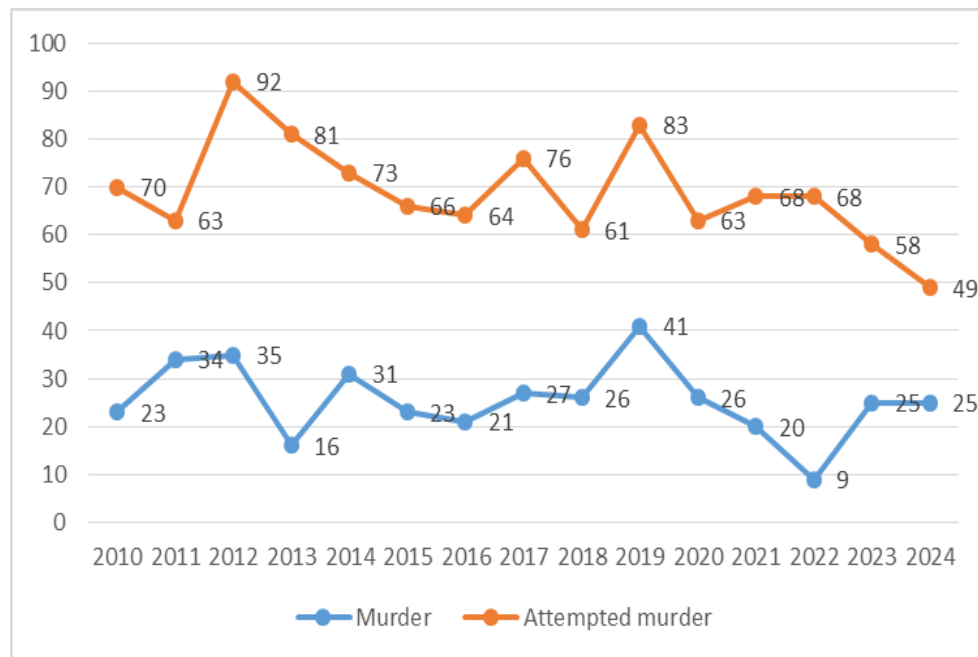


Figure 2. Statistics on homicides and attempted homicides recorded in Bucharest between 2010 and 2024 (number of cases recorded).

Source: Bucharest Tribunal Prosecutor's Office and the Homicide Department of the Bucharest Police – "Statistical overview of violent crimes committed in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024" – comparative overview presented in the analysis.

This results in an overall average of 26.80 murders recorded per year (the maximum being 41 murders in 2019 and the minimum being 9 such acts in 2022) and an average of 67.67 attempted murders (the maximum being 92 attempts in 2012 and the minimum being 49 in 2024). If we refer to the total number of offences, the average is 94.46 per year. Between 2020 and 2024, the statistical situation regarding murders recorded in Bucharest is as follows:

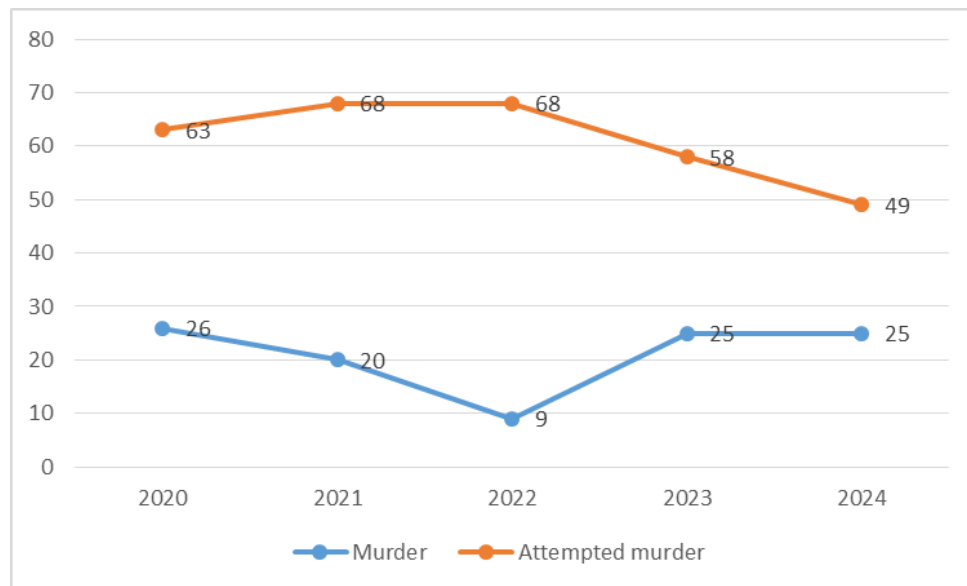


Figure 3. Number of murders and attempted murders recorded in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024.

Source: Bucharest Tribunal Prosecutor's Office and the Homicide Department of the Bucharest Police – "Statistical situation of violent crimes committed in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024".

The data show that during this period the number of murders fell considerably (–17), from 26 (2020) to 9 (2022) during the restrictions, which is the lowest figure in the last 15 years, and after the state of alert ended, they returned to close to the average of 26.80 murders/year, with 25 such acts in 2023 and 2024. The downward trend in the number of murders committed in the capital is in line with the national trend for the period 2010–2021 (Balica 2023, 16).

The number of attempted murders committed in the capital increased slightly during the period when restrictions were in place – from 63 in 2020 to 68 in 2021, remaining at the same level in 2022, while this year they are falling steadily, –10 in 2023 (58 attempts), –9 in 2024 (49 attempts – the lowest level in the last 15 years). At the national level, the downward trend in the number of attempted murders has been visible since 2016 (Balica 2023, 16).

If we analyse the evolution of the number of homicides between 2020 and 2024, compared to the last 15 years, we find that the average for the five-year period was 21 homicides per year, significantly lower than the average for the last 15 years (26.80 homicides/year). The same trend can be seen in terms of attempted murders. Thus, between 2020 and 2025, an average of 61.20 attempted murders were committed per year, a significant decrease compared to the average for the last 15 years – 67.67 attempted murders/year.

Period of traffic restrictions. Between 15 March 2020 and 8 March 2022 (specifically, 1 year and 358 days), there were 49 murders and 122 attempted murders. If we take an average – considering the period to be 2 years – the result is 24.50 murders compared to the overall average of 26.80 (–2.30 murders or –8.58%) and 61 attempts per year compared to 67.67 (–5.67 attempts or –9.85% in percentage terms).

Post-restriction period. For 2022–2024, the average is 19.66 murders and 58.33 attempts per year, representing a decrease of –7.14 murders (–26.64%) and –9.34 attempts (–13.80%). It is true that in the case of homicides, the decrease is largely due to the year 2022, with the situation returning to a constant value slightly below the overall average in the other two years. In the attempted segment, the decrease is consistent in the last two years of this period.

We therefore have two periods of decline, one slight during the period of traffic restrictions and one marked after their lifting. Why did the restrictions not lead to a more significant decrease in the commission of these acts? The answer must be sought in the specific nature of the commission of these acts in Bucharest. Thus, “more than two-thirds of the murders in Bucharest between 2017 and 2019 were committed within the family” (Balica *et al.* 2023, 68). An article presenting the particularities of murders committed in Bucharest, written from the perspective of a representative of the authorities investigating these crimes, shows that “in 80% of cases (of murder), the perpetrator knows the victim – a relative, friend or neighbour” (Gavriş 2012, 128).

There is clearly a “domestic” aspect to a large proportion of the murders committed in Bucharest. In addition, at the beginning of the pandemic, well before the travel restrictions were imposed, there was a considerable influx of Romanian citizens who normally worked outside the country (students, workers, even tourists) and who returned and remained in Romania during the pandemic. It is clear that the most important social segment in which murders occur was not significantly affected by movement restrictions – interactions with close friends and family remained at the same level or even intensified as the need for socialisation increased. Consequently, homicides could not have decreased significantly, as they were mainly the result of interactions between people who were socially close.

Protective measures ordered during the period under review. Between 2020 and 2024, protection orders (POs) and provisional protection orders (PPOs) were issued as follows:

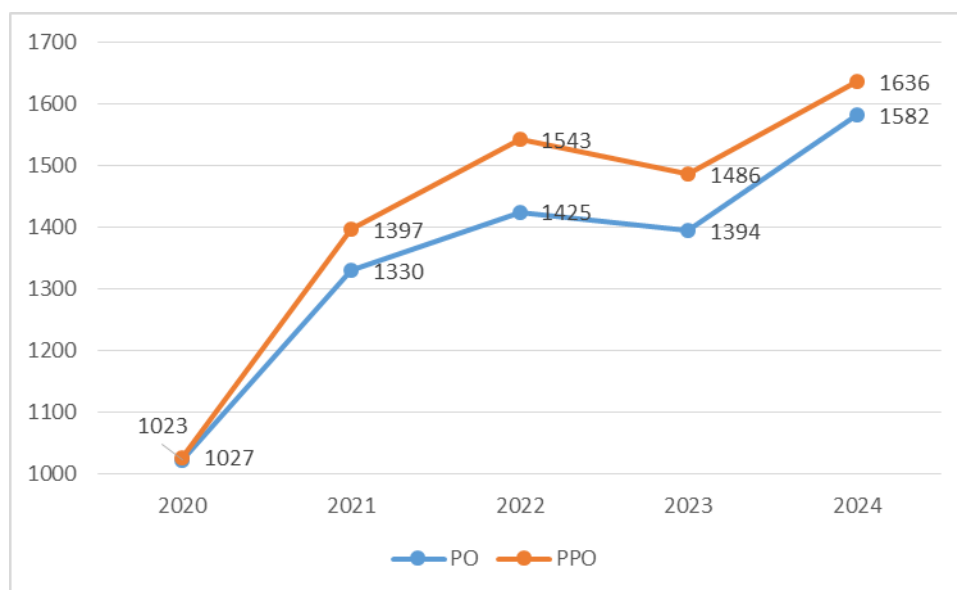


Figure 4. Evolution of the number of POs and PPOs issued in Bucharest between 2020 and 2024.

Source: Bucharest Police Department: Activity analysis 2020–2024.

The increase in the number of protection orders and provisional protection orders is constant and significant: from 1,023 POs in 2020 to 1,582 POs in 2024 (+54.64%), and in terms of PPOs, the increase is even more pronounced: from 1027 to 1636 PPOs (+59.30%). Their role is to protect victims of abuse and prevent acts of extreme violence, particularly murders and attempted murders; corroborating the significant increase in the number of protection orders and provisional protection orders with the steady decline in the number of such serious crimes, it can be assessed that the use of these protective instruments has contributed to the downward trend in homicides.

Victims of homicide offences. In Bucharest, during the period analysed, according to data from the statistics recorded by the Bucharest Tribunal Prosecutor's Office (PTB) and the Homicide Department (SOM) of the Capital Police, of the 417 injured persons, 289 were men (69.4%) and 128 were women (30.6%). In terms of age, 390 were adults (93.5%) and 27 were under 18 (6.5%) (PTB, SOM. 2020–2024).

CONCLUSION

During the period when traffic restrictions were imposed by the authorities, there was a slight decrease in the number of homicides and attempted homicides committed in Bucharest, but this must be interpreted in the broader context of the

downward trend in the number of such crimes. Thus, the decrease in the number of homicides committed in the capital is in line with the national trend for the period 2010–2021 (Balica 2023, 16), while the decline in the number of attempted murders has been visible since 2016 (Balica 2023, 16). After the restrictions were lifted, the decline was much more pronounced, with the lowest figures in the last 15 years being recorded for both murder – 9 such acts in 2022 – and attempted murder – 49 offences in 2024.

Almost 7 out of 10 victims are men, and in terms of age, 93.5% of the injured persons are adults (PTB, SOM. 2020–2024). The evolution of cases in which women were assaulted has fairly constant values: in 2020 (20 female victims) and 2021 (also 20 female victims), every 15.2 days, a woman was the victim of murder or attempted murder; in 2022 (19 female victims), the number decreases and the interval is longer – 19.2 days between the crimes being committed. Their number increases consistently in 2023 (40 female victims), reaching a point where every 9.1 days a woman is killed or is the victim of an attempted murder, after which it returns to a value close to that of the first years of the interval (21 female victims), with assaults occurring every 17.3 days (PTB, SOM. 2020–2024).

A clearer picture of the causes of this evolution and the risk factors underlying the commission of murders during this period could be obtained through a qualitative approach – interviews with perpetrators of murder and/or victims of attempted murder, analysis of documents prepared by the authorities who investigated the murders, and perhaps analysis of the responses to some relevant questions in this area from surveys conducted during the period studied.

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