

# Comparing characteristics of homicides in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden

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## Abstract

There are many challenges when conducting European cross-national research on homicide. In particular, European cross-national knowledge on lethal violence has been hampered for a long time because European countries tend to differ in the data sources they used and in their definitions of homicide. To stimulate cross-national research efforts in Europe, this chapter compares the characteristics of homicides in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden. More specifically, in a three-year research project, financed by the European Union, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden joined forces to build a first joint database on homicide in Europe, referred to as the European Homicide Monitor, EHM. This Monitor exclusively contains data from the three countries on 1,577 homicide cases, involving 1,666 victims and 1,917 offenders. On the basis of these data, first findings indicate evidence of cross-national differences between Finnish, Dutch and Swedish homicides, and especially in (a) the average homicide rate, (b) location of homicides, (c) offenders' modus operandi, (d) the average age of homicide victims and offenders, and (e) the birth country of offenders and victims. Although this chapter shows that building a joint European Monitor is feasible, it also indicates that several methodological issues still exist when conducting cross-national research on homicide.

**Keywords:** homicide, lethal violence, European Homicide Monitor, cross-national research, comparing characteristics, Finland, Sweden, The Netherlands

## Introduction

This chapter<sup>1</sup> provides a cross-national comparison of homicide characteristics in three European countries, based on data from the European Homicide Monitor (hereafter: EHM) – the first joint database on homicide in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Earlier in this book, Liem has provided a valuable general outline of the status quo when it comes homicide research in Europa. As pointed out by Liem, the European Homicide Monitor is a recent initiative that has great potential to stimulate further cross-national homicide research in Europe. This chapter therefore devotes full attention to the European Homicide Monitor and its first results. More specifically, it examines the characteristics of homicide cases in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands. First, I will briefly discuss why and how the joint database was created. After that, and based on the EHM, I will discuss the main results of the first comparative analysis to create a first descriptive overview of characteristics of homicide in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands concerning: (a) homicide incidents (rates, location, modus operandi, homicide subtype, victim-offender relationship and alcohol use), (b) homicide victims (age, sex, and country of birth), and (c) homicide offenders (age, sex, country of birth, and employment status).

### *Background and aim of this study*

Violence resulting in the killing of a human being is commonly considered the most serious form of violence, both in and outside Europe. However, compared to especially the United States, there is relatively limited systematic cross-national knowledge on lethal violence in Europe (Liem & Pridemore, 2012). The main reason for this is that the comparability of national homicide data among European countries is extremely limited. This is largely due to the fact that existing national sources commonly differ in their approach: for example, some only contain homicide data on either the offenders or the victims whereas others contain data at incident level (Smit, De Jong, & Bijleveld, 2012). This means that these sources commonly do not include data on offenders, victims and incidents combined. In addition, differences in (legal) definitions have also contributed to this rather unsatisfactory situation (Smit et al., 2012). For example, in terms of the legal elements in the definition of homicide, countries differ in what they consider a homicide, resulting in the inclusion or exclusion of non-intentional homicide, such as assault leading to death. Also, in some homicide statistics attempted homicide is counted under the category homicide, thwarting comparability between European countries (Smit et al., 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is largely based on two publications of the EHM research team, Ganpat et al. (2011) and Liem et al. (2013).

<sup>2</sup> The EHM research team consists of Sven Granath, Johanna Hagstedt from The National Council for Crime Prevention, Sweden; Janne Kivivuori and Martti Lehti from The National Research Institute of Legal Policy, Finland; and Soenita Ganpat, Marieke Liem, Paul Nieuwebeerta, from the Institute for Criminal Law and Criminology at Leiden University, the Netherlands.

Nevertheless, systematic cross-national knowledge on lethal violence in Europe is crucial, especially because it provides insight into trends and patterns and may contribute to the prevention of and fight against the most serious crime in Europe.

To overcome this important limitation, the EHM project has taken a first critical step toward creating a joint database for European countries. More specifically, through a three-year project<sup>3</sup> (period 2009-2011), the EHM dataset was set up to create a directly comparable homicide database between Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands, describing main similarities and differences in certain characteristics of lethal violence between these countries.

## **Data and Method**

### *Data sources used in this study*

The EHM contains all homicides that were committed during the period 2003-2006 in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands which were known to the police or other law enforcement authorities, comprising data on characteristics of homicide incidents, victims and offenders. This time frame was chosen, because all three countries had data available for these four years.

### *Definitions*

In this research project, homicide is defined as “an intentional criminal act of violence by one or more human beings resulting in the death of one or more human beings” (Ganpat et al., 2011, p. 32). In the three countries, this definition roughly covers the country’s legal codes of homicide including murder, manslaughter, infanticide or assault leading to death; however, in contrast to the Nordic countries, the Dutch legal definition of homicide does not include assault leading to death. Furthermore, excluded in all three countries were attempted homicide, suicide, abortion, euthanasia, assistance with suicide, involuntary manslaughter (e.g., drunk driving) and legally justified killings (e.g., killings by police).

### *National homicide data per country*

By combining separate national homicide data already collected in Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands, we were able to construct the EHM database, which will be discussed further below.

The first dataset covers national data from Finland, maintained by the National Research Institute of Legal Policy, the Police Department of the Ministry of the Interior, and the Finnish Police College (Lehti & Kivivuori, 2012). Based on the Finnish Homicide Monitoring System (FHMS), this database contains all cases of lethal violence – covering the legal definition of

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<sup>3</sup> The work presented in this study has been funded with support by the European Union.

murder, manslaughter, infanticide and assault leading to death – which were committed in the period 2003-2006 and were known to the police (for more information, see also Ganpat et al., 2011).

The second dataset contains national data from Sweden, maintained by The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet, Brå) (see also Granath, 2012; Rying, 2007). The Swedish homicide data comprises all cases of lethal violence in the country in the period 1990-2008, covering the legal definition of murder, manslaughter and assault leading to death which became known to the police or to other law enforcement authorities (Ganpat et al., 2011).

The third dataset includes national data from the Netherlands, jointly maintained by Leiden University and the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR). The Dutch data stems from the Dutch Homicide Monitor, which is an ongoing monitor based on multiple (partially overlapping) sources, containing all homicide cases in the Netherlands committed in the period 1992-2009 and covering the legal definitions of murder and manslaughter (for more information about the Dutch Homicide Monitor, see also: Ganpat et al., 2011; Ganpat & Liem, 2012; Ganpat, Van der Leun, & Nieuwbeerta, 2013a, 2013b; Leistra & Nieuwbeerta, 2003; Nieuwbeerta & Leistra, 2007; Van Os, Ganpat & Nieuwbeerta, 2010).

To lay a foundation for the joint dataset, common variables were selected by thoroughly comparing the variables in the three datasets. Most of these common variables required recoding, for which a guidebook and a coding manual especially created for this study were used (for more information, see also Ganpat et al., 2011). Then, each of the three national datasets was gradually merged into one joint dataset, after which the dataset was rigorously checked for inconsistencies. As such, the joint database – referred to as EHM – consists of 85 variables concerning characteristics of the incidents, victims and offenders. In total, it comprises data on 1,577 homicide cases, involving 1,666 victims and 1,917 offenders. A selection of these variables is discussed below.

## **Results**

### *Characteristics of homicide incidents in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden*

In 2010, the total population in the Netherlands was estimated at 16.6 million; Finland counted 5.4 million inhabitants, and Sweden 9.3 million inhabitants. Of the total 1,577 homicide cases committed in the period 2003-2006, nearly half of all homicide cases (N = 760) were committed in the Netherlands; a third of the cases (N = 475) occurred in Finland, and approximately a fifth in Sweden (N = 342) (Table 1.1). However, taking into account the population size of each country, the average annual homicide rate during this period was highest in Finland (2.34 per

100,000 population), and lowest in Sweden (0.98). The Netherlands took an intermediate position with a homicide rate of 1.26 per 100,000 inhabitants.

[ Table 1.1 around here]

The vast majority of all homicides involved one offender and one victim, and occurred in the evening or at night (Figure 1.1). Furthermore, comparing the homicide location between the countries revealed that in the Nordic countries it was more common for the event to take place in a private setting (both countries 75%), whereas in the Netherlands it was more common that the homicide occurred in a public place (50%). When it comes to offenders' modus operandi (MO), a sharp instrument was the most commonly used weapon in Finland (42%) and Sweden (45%), whereas a firearm was the most commonly used weapon in the Netherlands (35%) which was more than double the rate of the other two countries (Table 1.2). Noteworthy here to mention is that previous research has shown that the firearm ownership in the three countries was lowest in the Netherlands (5%) when compared to Sweden (19%) and Finland (38%) (Van Dijk, Van Kesteren, & Smit, 2007).

[ Figure 1.1 around here]

Domestic homicide was the most common type of homicide to occur in all three countries, and especially intimate partner homicide (Table 1.2). However, domestic homicide more often took place in Sweden (45%) than in Finland (36%) and the Netherlands (39%). Homicides in the criminal milieu were more often committed in the Netherlands (19%) than in Sweden (12%) and Finland (3%). Likewise, sexual homicides were much more prevalent in the Netherlands (3%) than in both Finland (0.2%) and Sweden (0.3%), while robbery homicides more often took place in the Netherlands (9%) and Sweden (8%) than in Finland (3%).

[ Table 1.2 around here]

Also, comparing the victim-offender relationship between the countries demonstrates that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the victim and the offender knew each other (Table 1.3). However, the data reveals that Dutch and Swedish homicide victims more often had an intimate or family relationship with the offenders (49 and 45%, respectively), whereas most Finnish victims and offenders were acquaintances (54%). In addition, although data on substance use was not available for the Netherlands, in most Swedish homicides (58%) and certainly in Finnish homicides (83%) at least one of the involved parties was found to be under the influence of

alcohol during the incident. Whereas data on alcohol use by victim is missing for the Netherlands, Finnish victims (77%) were far more often under the influence of alcohol during the offense than their Swedish counterparts (45%). In addition, similar to what was found for victims, Finnish offenders (82%) were far more often under the influence of alcohol during the incident than Swedish offenders (52%) suggesting that in the majority of Finnish cases both parties were under the influence of alcohol. Again, comparisons with Dutch offenders could not be made as these data are missing in the Netherlands. Correspondently, the alcohol consumption level in the countries was highest in Finland (10,7 litres of pure alcohol per capita in adult population) compared to Sweden (6,9) and the Netherlands (9,6) (OECD Health Data, 2010).

[ Table 1.3 around here]

#### *Background characteristics of homicide victims in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden*

During the period 2003-2006, a total of 1,666 victims were killed in the three countries, of which 820 were killed in the Netherlands, 491 in Finland and 355 in Sweden. On average, the Netherlands has the highest number of homicide victims per year with 205 victims; Finland takes an intermediate position with 123 victims a year, whereas Sweden has the lowest number of homicide victims with an average of 89 a year. In all three countries over 60 percent of all homicide victims were male (Table 1.4). Over two-thirds of homicide victims were between the age of 25 and 40 years, but the mean age of homicide victims in the Netherlands (37.4) was lower than those in Finland (42.1) and Sweden (41.5). Furthermore, although in all three countries most victims were born in the country where the homicide took place, Dutch victims were far more often born in a foreign country (43%) (and especially in the Dutch Antilles, Surinam, Turkey and Morocco) compared to Finland (4%) and Sweden (20%). In particular, this suggests an overrepresentation of foreign-borns among Dutch victims. However, given that the birth country of a relatively high percentage of the Dutch victims was unknown (45%), this finding should be treated with considerable caution (Table 1.4). The overrepresentation becomes more apparent when the population makeup of the countries is considered: In 2010, 11% of the Dutch population was born in a foreign country compared to 4% in Finland and 14% in Sweden (Statistics Netherlands, Statistics Finland; Statistics Sweden).

[ Table 1.4 around here]

#### *Background characteristics of homicide offenders in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden*

In the period 2003-2006, a total of 1,917 homicide offenders were registered in the three countries; more than half of all offenders were Dutch (N = 1,022), a quarter were Finnish (N =

475), and approximately one fifth were Swedish (N = 420). On average, with 256 offenders the Netherlands has the highest number of homicide offenders per year, followed by 119 in Finland and 105 in Sweden. As Table 1.5 shows, in all three countries, homicide offenders were mainly male (approximately 90% in these countries). As regards age, Dutch offenders (31.9) were on average younger than Finnish (37.5) and Swedish offenders (34.7). Furthermore, in all three countries perpetrators of robbery homicide and night life violence were on average the youngest, while perpetrators of intimate partner homicide were the oldest. In all three countries, the majority of homicide offenders were born in the same country as where the crime took place. However, as with victims, homicide offenders in the Netherlands were much more often (48%) born in a foreign country (especially in the Dutch Antilles, Surinam, Turkey and Morocco) compared to Finnish (5%) and Swedish offenders (25%). Accordingly, an overrepresentation of foreign-borns also exists among Dutch offenders. But again, given that the birth country of a relatively high percentage of the Dutch offenders was unknown (38%), this finding should also be treated with considerable caution.

Finally, Finnish homicide offenders were more often unemployed than Swedish offenders (51 vs. 43%). However, care needs to be taken in interpreting these results, as the employment status was unknown for a relatively high percentage of Swedish offenders (35%), and is wholly lacking in the Dutch data.

[ Table 1.5 around here]

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The aim of the EHM was to produce a first cross-national description of main similarities and differences in characteristics of homicides in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands. We found several differences and similarities. First of all, of the three countries studied and for the period 2003-2006, Finland had the highest homicide rate whereas Sweden had the lowest, and the Netherlands took an intermediate position. Further, the most common type of homicide in all three countries was domestic homicide, in particular intimate partner homicide. However, homicides committed in the criminal milieu and sexual homicides were more common in the Netherlands than in the Nordic countries, and more robbery homicides took place in the Netherlands and in Sweden than in Finland. Also, most homicides in the Nordic countries occurred in a private setting whereas Dutch homicides more often took place in a public setting. In addition, in the Nordic countries, the most commonly used weapon to kill the victim was a sharp instrument whereas a firearm was the most commonly used weapon in the Netherlands. This result is remarkable in light of the fact that, with 5%, Dutch firearm ownership is among the lowest in Europe, and firearm ownership is far higher in Sweden (19%) and certainly in Finland

(38%) compared to the Netherlands. In fact, Finnish firearm ownership is among the highest in the European Union (Van Dijk et al., 2007). Possibly, the higher proportion of firearms in Dutch homicides may relate to the fact that in the Netherlands, homicides occurred more frequently in the criminal milieu than in the Nordic countries. Especially relevant in light of this result is a recent study by Ganpat, Van der Leun and Nieuwbeerta (2015) showing that certain immediate situational characteristics are particularly conducive to a lethal outcome, including firearm use by the offender and alcohol use by the victim. These findings make it all the more relevant to gather national data on the role of alcohol use in homicide cases which is currently unavailable in the Netherlands, and to further invest in hindering access to (illegal) firearms in the Netherlands (Ganpat, 2014). Furthermore, in the Netherlands and Sweden a much greater proportion of victims had an intimate or family relationship with the offender, whereas most homicide victims in Finland were acquaintances of the offender. Dutch homicide victims as well as offenders were on average younger than victims and offenders in the Nordic countries, and were also far more often born in a foreign country than their Finnish and Swedish counterparts. Finally, while no comparison was possible with the Netherlands, in homicide cases in the Nordic countries - most strikingly in Finland - the great majority of victims and/or offenders were under the influence of alcohol. The Finnish finding may be related to the country's exceptionally high alcohol consumption level, which is above the European Union average (OECD Health Data, 2010).

All in all, this study highlights the relevance of cross-national comparisons on lethal violence in Europe. Evidently, the EHM provides an important tool for improving systematic knowledge on the subject. Such comparisons help to distinguish important similarities and differences in homicide patterns between European countries, and may in future help contribute to the prevention of and fight against the most serious crime in Europe.

Although the EHM has made an important step forward in European cross-national research, this chapter also showed that some methodological issues still exist hampering cross-national comparison to some extent. In particular, the relatively large amount of missing and unknown values is an important issue to consider when improving the monitor. Another issue to take into account is that the legal definition of homicide was not completely identical given that assault leading to death is counted as homicide in both Finland and Sweden while disregarded under the homicide category of the Dutch Criminal Code. Though this may have distorted the results to some extent, noted is that the category assault leading to death only concerned a small percentage of the cases. Also, as a consequence of recoding existing national categories, in some countries a relatively large proportion of the data was recoded under the category 'other', causing an amount of diffusion when analyzing cross-national data. This was especially the case when coding the homicide subtype variable.

Obviously, the EHM does not preclude at all the possibility that it could be further expanded, refined, and improved. In fact, since this could further enhance the quality of the data, it is highly recommended. In addition, seeing how only a small selection of the EHM variables were discussed here, the EHM offers rich potential for future research to address various issues of interest in the area of lethal violence. Filling an important void in European homicide research, this effort has proven that constructing a joint European homicide database is possible, opening new doors for research in various domains of homicide . To better understand cross-national differences in homicide patterns, we therefore call for more cross-national homicide research in Europe, preferably using a unique internationally comparable homicide database such as the EHM. Joining forces in this way should generate more systematic knowledge on lethal violence in Europe, which in turn may well contribute to reducing this most serious crime.

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### **Biography**

Soenita M. Ganpat holds a position as Research Associate at the Department of Social Sciences at Nottingham Trent University, the United Kingdom. While completing her PhD research at Leiden University in the Netherlands, she played an active role in maintaining and further expanding the Dutch Homicide Monitor in order to provide the most reliable up-to-date overview of homicide in the Netherlands. She furthermore contributed to an international homicide research project, financed by the European Union, aimed at building the first joint database on homicide in Europe, the European Homicide Monitor. Her research focuses on homicide, violence, interaction between offender-victim-third parties, personal characteristics of offenders and victims and immediate situational factors (e.g., alcohol use, weapon use, presence of third parties, and time and location).

## TABLES

*Table 1.1: Characteristics of homicide incidents in Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden (2003-2006)*

	Finland	The Netherlands	Sweden	All
	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>
Total number of homicide cases	475	760	342	1,577
Total number of homicide victims	491	820	355	1,666
Total number of homicide offenders	475	1,022	420	1,917
	Finland	The Netherlands	Sweden	
Average annual homicide rate	2.34	1.26	0.98	—

*Figure 1.1: The daily distribution of homicides in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden (2003-2006)*

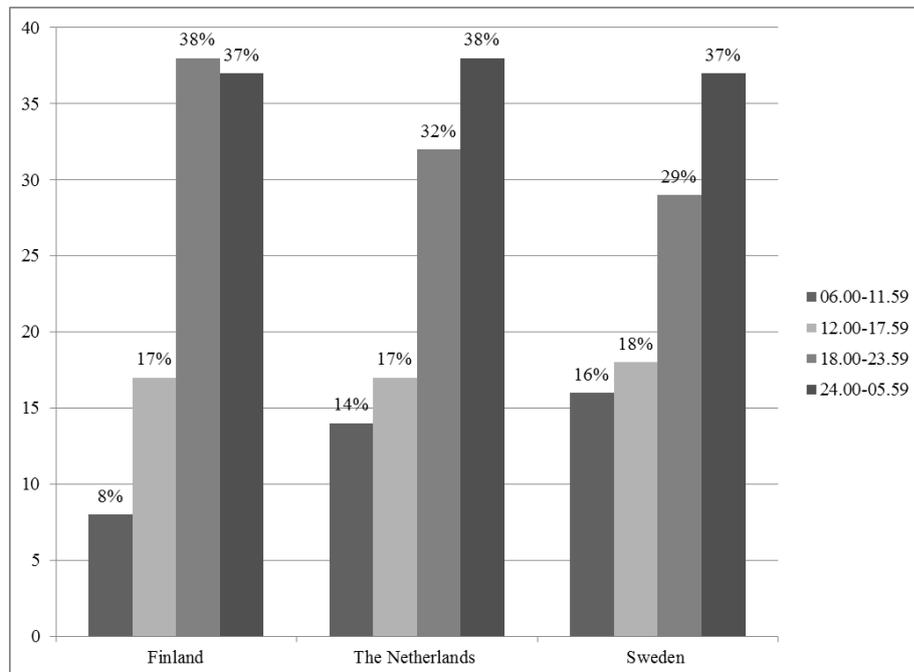


Table 1.2: Characteristics of homicide incidents in Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden (2003-2006)

Characteristics	Finland		The Netherlands		Sweden	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
<i>Location</i>						
Public	115	25	373	50	83	25
Private	355	75	374	50	244	75
Total	470		747		327	
<i>Modus operandi (by victim)</i>						
Firearm	77	16	256	35	56	17
Blunt instrument	41	8	47	6	34	10
Sharp instrument	202	42	250	34	154	45
Strangulation	45	9	63	9	31	9
Hitting/kicking	80	18	76	11	40	12
Other	40	8	33	5	24	7
Total	485		725		339	
<i>Type of homicide (by incident)</i>						
Domestic homicide						
Intimate partner homicide	112	24	152	24	92	29
Child homicide	24	5	39	6	15	5
Other domestic	31	7	59	9	35	11
Criminal milieu	13	3	123	19	38	12
Robbery	12	3	58	9	23	8
Non-felony related homicide						
Nightlife violence	23	5	22	3	31	10
Mental illness: Non-family	25	5	12	2	19	6
Sexual motive	1	0.2	18	3	1	0.3
Other	211	46	148	23	64	20
Total	458		631		318	

Table 1.3: Victim-offender relationship in homicides in Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden in 2003-2006 (by victim)

Victim-offender relation	Finland		The Netherlands		Sweden	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Intimate-partner/ Ex-partner	109	23	124	28	87	28
Homosexual partner	3	1	5	1	1	0.3
Child	27	6	42	9	16	5
Parent	18	4	19	4	24	8
Sibling	4	1	8	2	5	2
Other relative	6	1	22	5	6	2
Acquaintance	257	54	191	43	129	41
Stranger	51	11	32	7	43	14
All valid cases	475	100	443	100	311	100
All cases	491		820		355	

Table 1.4 Background characteristics of homicide victims in Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden (2003-2006)

Characteristics	Finland		The Netherlands		Sweden	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
<i>Sex</i>						
Male	355	72	548	68	222	63
Female	136	28	260	32	133	38
<i>Age</i>						
≤ 17	30	6	82	10	23	7
18-24	38	8	91	11	41	13
25-39	139	29	301	38	92	28
40-64	249	51	265	33	133	40
≥ 65	35	7	61	8	40	12
Mean	42.1 (SD = 16.4)		37.4 (SD = 18.2)		41.5 (SD = 18.5)	
<i>Birth country</i>						
Native	461	96	256	57	229	80
Foreign-born	20	4	193	43	59	20

Table 1.5 Background characteristics of homicide offenders in Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden (2003-2006)

Characteristics	Finland		The Netherlands		Sweden	
	<i>N</i>	Percentage	<i>N</i>	Percentage	<i>N</i>	Percentage
<i>Sex</i>						
Male	413	89	778	90	340	89
Female	52	11	91	10	40	11
<i>Age</i>						
≤ 17	8	2	33	4	22	6
18-24	78	17	215	27	92	25
25-39	188	40	369	46	137	37
40-64	175	38	182	23	103	28
≥ 65	16	3	10	1	17	5
Mean	37.5 ( <i>SD</i> = 13.0)		31.9 ( <i>SD</i> = 11.3)		34.7 ( <i>SD</i> = 14.8)	
<i>Birth country</i>						
Native	435	95	332	53	232	75
Foreign-born	23	5	301	48	78	25