Ukraine war pushes civilian casualties from explosive weapons to four-year high

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Civilian casualties from the use of explosive weapons soared by 83% last year because of the war in [Ukraine](https://www.theguardian.com/world/ukraine), according to a monitoring organisation that counts the number of deaths caused by conflict and war.

Action on Armed Violence (AOVA) said the total number reported killed and injured in 2022 was 20,776, the highest level since 2018, with 10,381 casualties in Ukraine alone, based on reports from English language media.

Its figure, though, is almost certainly a significant underestimate, partly because media reports only capture the most serious incidents. The latest UN figures report 17,994 civilian casualties in Ukraine, 6,919 killed and 11,075 injured.

Even the UN figure is considered low, as it has not been possible to record casualty numbers from places where some of the most serious fighting has taken place, most [notably the city of Mariupol, destroyed in a Russian siege](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/16/ukraine-life-in-mariupol-under-russian-occupation)last spring, but also in other areas of intense fighting including Izium and Sievierodonetsk.

But the monitoring group’s methodology has been consistently applied for over a decade and so provides a snapshot of the level of global conflict and the seriousness of its impact on non combatants caught up in war.

Explosive weapon use in towns and cities accounted for 69% of incidents recorded in 2022, but caused 94% of all reported civilian casualties, with the figure even higher in Ukraine partly because of [Russia’s tactics of targeting urban areas](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/09/ukraine-reinforces-bakhmut-defences-relentless-russian-assault).

“Russian explosive attacks,” said Iain Overton, executive director of AOAV, were “specifically aimed at the Ukrainian civilian population” – and when aimed at towns and cities, he added “over 98% of those killed or injured were reported to be civilians”.

Reflecting such data, last November, 80 countries led by the [US, UK and France signed a declaration in Dublin](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/18/dozens-of-countries-to-sign-deal-to-curb-bombing-in-urban-areas) pledging to refrain from urban bombing, the first time countries have agreed to curb the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Russia and Ukraine, however, did not sign.

The start of the major war in [Europe](https://www.theguardian.com/world/europe-news) dramatically reversed a three-year period in which reported civilian casualties from explosive violence were under 20,000 a year. A year before, in 2021, the figure was 11,343.

Reported casualties in Ukraine alone were eight times more than the next most affected country, [Afghanistan](https://www.theguardian.com/world/afghanistan), which was followed by Syria, Somalia and Ethiopia, with state based violence from Russia alone causing 45% of civilian casualties.

However, the overall total of civilian casualties is still lower than the rest of the 2010s when fighting in [Syria](https://www.theguardian.com/world/syria) and Afghanistan was more intense. Between 2013 and 2017, the number of civilians killed and wounded ran at more than 30,000 a year.