



National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

Jeremy Travis, Director

January 1997

Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Research in Brief:

A study, supported by the National Institute of Justice, of arrestees' access to firearms, their availability, and the reasons they are owned and used.

Key issues: Data from the Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program were used to explore the extent of firearm ownership and possession among arrestees and the ease with which they can be acquired illegally. More than 7,000 arrestees in 11 major urban areas that participate in the DUF program were interviewed for the study.

Key findings: A higher percentage of arrestees than people in the general population have ever owned a firearm. They acquire firearms readily, and a substantial number have used them to commit crime. Arrestees say guns are easy to obtain, and the ease with which this is done suggests the illegal market is the most likely source. In fact, more than half the arrestees say it is easy to obtain guns illegally.

The study helps confirm the link between guns and gang membership and guns and drug markets: Among the arrestees, the groups that have the easiest access to firearms are drug sellers and gang members. Juvenile males are also

continued ...

Illegal Firearms: Access and Use By Arrestees

by Scott H. Decker, Susan Pennell, and Ami Caldwell

Firearms ownership is much more common among people who have been arrested than it is in the general population. Arrestees say it is easy and takes little time for them to obtain firearms illegally. Among those who have owned a gun,¹ a substantial number have used it to commit crime. Some arrestees are more likely than others to have such easy access to guns: those who sell drugs and those who belong to a gang. Perhaps most troubling is the strong association between guns and youth: among juvenile male arrestees, gun ownership and use are much higher than among arrestees generally.

These findings were revealed in a study supported by the National Institute of Justice conducted in response to the Attorney General's concern about the increase in deaths and injuries due to firearms violence since the mid-1980s. Her concern prompted a request for a better understanding of the illegal firearms market and its participants. The study presents an innovative method to gain insight into the dynamics of that market: from people who were arrested and booked. Arrestees in 11 major urban areas across the country were interviewed for the study. (See "The Study Method: DUF As a Research Platform.")

Taken together, the results of this study of firearms access, availability, and use

among arrestees produced a picture of a culture in which possession and use of guns is not only common, but also tolerated and accepted as the norm. The findings suggest that some current approaches to reducing gun crime—particularly laws against illegal possession and use—need to be supplemented by a multifaceted intervention strategy.

Characteristics of arrestees

The arrestees who provided the information about their access to and use of firearms reflect, to a large extent, the characteristics of arrestees nationwide. However, there was variation among the 11 sites. For example, while more than half (55 percent) of all those interviewed for the study were black, the proportion ranged from a low of 16 percent to a high of 92 percent, depending on the site. Drug use displayed a similar pattern. While more than one-third overall (37 percent) tested positive for cocaine, the range from site to site was from 28 to 58 percent. In use of methamphetamine, there was considerable regional variation, with sites in the Midwest and the East having rates under 1 percent, to higher ranges (11 to 44 percent) in sites on the West coast.

The proportion of arrestees who had ever owned a gun—37 percent of those

Issues and Findings

continued . . .

more likely than arrestees overall to engage in gun-related behavior. By contrast, drug use does not make arrestees more prone to own and use guns.

The exploration of attitudes in particular reveals a culture in which gun use is tolerated and even condoned. A substantial proportion say owning a gun confers respect from one's peers, and a substantial proportion also agree that there are certain situations in which using a gun is acceptable.

At the same time, large proportions of arrestees are also victimized by guns, with drug sellers and gang members at particularly high risk.

The study suggests that some of the current approaches to reducing gun violence—particularly legal sanctions related to ownership and use—are not as effective as they might be. An approach that focuses on several intervention points by multiple agents is worth exploring.

Target audience: Public health officials, education administrators, probation/parole officers, juvenile court authorities, youth workers.

interviewed—also varied by site, from a low of 16 percent to a high of 47 percent. Of the sites where juvenile males were included in the study, the proportion who admitted to current membership in a gang varied widely—from 2 to 41 percent.

The variation among arrestees in drug use and other characteristics is considerable, but the study results are remarkably consistent when it comes to gun ownership, other weapon-related behavior, and attitude toward firearms use. They show that selling drugs, belonging to a gang, or being a juvenile male are the factors most influential in shaping this behavior and the attitudes related to it. In this respect the study helps confirm the role of gangs and drug markets in increasing access to and use of guns.

The questions explored

The study focus was firearms access, availability, and use, with sets of questions in each category asked of adults, both male and female, and, in seven sites, juvenile males. The first set of questions, which addressed how arrestees acquire guns, allowed a closer look at the illegal firearms market by examining the extent to which guns are obtained outside the law.

The issue of availability was examined through a series of questions about the ease with which firearms are obtained. If ease of procurement varies by type of arrestee, that has implications for formulating intervention strategies. In other words, if obtaining guns is easier for arrestees who belong to gangs, sell drugs, or use drugs, knowing this could be useful to law enforcement and others who deal with the problem of illegal firearms proliferation.

The issue of gun “use” involved reasons cited by arrestees for possession as well as use—whether the motive for having a gun was to commit crime, for retaliation, for protection, or for self-defense. The answers shed light on attitudes toward guns, which were also explored by asking arrestees what situations they considered appropriate for gun use. Finally, since offenders themselves are often victims of crime, they were asked about the extent to which they had been victimized by guns.

Findings: the pervasiveness of guns

Guns are carried all or most of the time by 14 percent of the arrestees interviewed, but among juvenile males the proportion rises to 20 percent, and among arrestees who are admitted gang members, it more than doubles, to 31 percent. The study did not reveal an association with drug use: Arrestees who tested positive for drugs were no more likely to own and use firearms than the sample of arrestees overall. Nor were there discernible differences by age and gender in firearms ownership and use.

Reasons for owning a gun. When arrestees were asked the most important reason for owning a gun, they most frequently cited the need for protection or self-defense (two-thirds). Hunting or target shooting was the reason next most frequently cited (22 percent). Other, less frequently cited reasons fell into the category of illegal use, among them for the drug trade or other criminal activity.

Ease of illegal procurement. More than half the arrestees said they paid cash for the gun they obtained most recently. The illegal firearms market as

a most likely source of handguns is suggested by the ease with which guns are obtained by arrestees and the tendency for many of them to have criminal backgrounds (which would prevent them from obtaining guns legally).

In fact, more than half the arrestees (55 percent) said that guns are easy to obtain illegally. The strong association

with drug selling and gang membership becomes apparent here: a much higher percentage of arrestees who sell drugs and who belong to gangs (more than three-fourths of both groups) say guns are easy to obtain by illegal means. The evidence about drug sales corroborates research that has revealed the impact of the crack cocaine market on firearms possession.²

Part of the ease of obtaining illegal firearms is the small amount of time it takes to do so. Fully 37 percent of the arrestees indicated they could obtain a gun in less than 1 week. One in five suggested they would need only 1 day or even less time, adding credibility to the notion that the urban firearms market is quite accessible.

Gun theft is common. Previous research has indicated that theft is a primary means by which arrestees obtain guns,³ and this study helps confirm that finding. Among all arrestees interviewed, 13 percent admitted to having stolen a gun. Again, the proportion of juvenile males, at one-fourth, is higher: almost double that of arrestees overall. Their higher rate of firearms theft helps explain their greater involvement in burglaries (their motive might be to steal a gun), and they steal guns because as juveniles they are prohibited from obtaining them legally.

Consistent with the pattern, drug sellers and gang members were more likely than other arrestees to have stolen a firearm (30 percent and 29 percent, respectively).

Guns and crime. When it comes to using guns in committing crime, being a juvenile male, a gang member, or a drug seller again means a greater tendency for involvement. Among arrestees overall, nearly one-fourth (23 percent) of those who owned a gun also said they had used one to commit crime. For juvenile males, the figure was higher at 33 percent, and among gang members and drug sellers, the percentage was higher still, at 50 percent and 42 percent, respectively.

The Study Method: DUF as a Research Platform

The importance of interviewing active criminals to learn more about their patterns of gun acquisition and use has been highlighted by researchers.* The information about firearms access and use for this study was obtained from interviews held with more than 7,000 people arrested in the first 6 months of 1995. The findings presented here represent the final results of the study. An interim report based on 3 months' data was published in the National Institute of Justice Research Preview series: *Arrestees and Guns: Monitoring the Illegal Firearms Market* (September 1995). The differences between the interim and final report findings are not statistically significant.

The interviews took place in 11 cities:

Atlanta	Denver	Detroit
Indianapolis	Los Angeles	Miami
New Orleans	Phoenix	St. Louis
San Diego	Washington, D.C.	

Of these, six were among the cities with the Nation's highest levels of violent crime. These cities—Atlanta, Detroit, Miami, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Washington—consistently record extraordinarily high rates of violent crime.

The 11 cities are among those participating in the Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice to track illicit drug use by arrestees. On a quarterly basis, people arrested and brought to booking facilities in major urban areas throughout the country are asked a series of questions about their drug-use history and provide urine samples that are tested for illicit drugs to confirm self-reported information.

Since establishment of DUF in 1987, its uses have expanded, and it now is used also as a research "platform"—a way to obtain information not just about drug use trends, but also about potential drug epidemics, illegal drug markets and, with this study, firearms use. One of the major advantages of using DUF as a platform is that the information comes from people closest to the street—arrestees who have yet to be confined for their most recent offense.

*Cook, P.J., "The Influence of Gun Availability on Violent Crime Patterns," in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, vol. 4, ed. Michael Tonry, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983; and Reiss, A., and J. Roth, *Understanding and Preventing Violence*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1993.

Arrestees as victims of gun violence

Whether they have been threatened, shot at, or injured by a gun, arrestees have a great deal of experience as victims as well as users. Being threatened with a gun is the lowest level in the range of gun victimization. Fully 59 percent of the arrestees interviewed said they had experienced such a threat. Again, drug sellers and gang members report much higher levels (about three-fourths in each group).

Being shot at is a more serious victimization. Again, consistent with the overall pattern, juvenile males and members of gangs are more likely than arrestees in general to have this experience. While about two in five arrestees said they had been shot at, one in two juvenile males and more than three in four gang members had been.

The most serious in the range of firearms victimization, gunshot injury, was reported by fewer people (16 percent). In this instance, youth does *not* put people at greater risk. Age means longer exposure, explaining why more adult males (21 percent) reported this type of victimization.

Attitudes toward firearms

Examining beliefs about guns—when to use them and why—can provide valuable insights into the “culture” of firearms that prevails among arrestees. Such beliefs explain under what circumstances they deem gun use legitimate. Arrestees’ attitudes reveal a “culture” that tolerates if not condones gun use in a variety of circumstances in which this behavior would not normally be acceptable.

That level of tolerance derives in large part from the perceived need for protection against victimization. A high proportion of arrestees cite protection in their neighborhoods as the reason for needing a gun (42 percent). It is no surprise that, given the high-risk activities they engage in, drug sellers and gang members are far more likely to cite this reason (58 percent and 64 percent, respectively).

The role of peer group members is important in shaping the culture of firearms. When arrestees were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “Your crowd respects you if you have a gun,” 28 percent said they did. Again, among drug sellers and gang members the proportion is much higher—4 in 10 of each group agreed with the statement. Their response may reflect not only the impact of peers, but also their recognition of potential victimization by customers and rival gang members.

Arrestees were also asked what circumstances they considered appropriate for using (rather than merely owning) a firearm. Nine percent agreed with the statement, “It is OK to shoot someone who disrespected you.” Among juvenile males, twice that proportion agreed, as did still higher proportions of drug sellers and gang members (21 and 34 percent, respectively). Clearly, the notion of “respect” as understood by these groups is an important factor in explaining attitudes that condone, if not promote, the criminal use of firearms.

A far higher proportion of arrestees see retaliation for harm inflicted on them as an acceptable reason for shooting someone. Twenty-eight percent agreed with the statement, “It is OK to shoot

someone who hurt you.” They probably interpret harm as a more grievous affront than disrespect. For the three high-risk groups, the pattern remains consistent: much higher proportions agree that retaliation for harm justifies shooting someone. Evidently, drug sellers and gang members need to demonstrate by their willingness to retaliate that they will not tolerate an affront nor will they easily “back down” or be victimized by a future affront.

Suggested responses

The research findings suggest that many recent strategies have been less successful than they might be. In addition to barring juveniles from owning firearms, most States have in recent years increased the penalties for illegal firearm possession and for using a gun to commit a crime. One result of increased penalties has been longer prison sentences. However, the actual deterrent effect of more convictions and increased penalties is not fully understood. This study offers evidence that such laws have produced little in the way of deterrence for arrestees, who continue to obtain and use firearms with ease.

Along with other recent studies, this one suggests that reduction in gun violence will occur only if a variety of agencies join in the effort to reduce illegal access to firearms by arrestees. The recommendations resulting from this research focus on law enforcement, supportive work with youths at risk, and coordinated responses by communities.

Police strategies. Local police remain the most critical group in reducing access to and use of illegal firearms. Targeted sweeps in neighborhoods that

have high levels of firearm violence are likely to pay dividends in removal of guns from the hands of potential offenders. The results of a Kansas City gun experiment lend credence to this observation. In Kansas City, gun seizures in a specific area increased by more than 65 percent, leading to the conclusion that gun crime can be reduced significantly by focusing on firearms “hot spots.”⁴

The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department recently initiated a firearm suppression program in which officers knock on doors and obtain permission to search the rooms of juveniles for illegal firearms (in return for a guarantee not to prosecute on the basis of the search results). An average of more than 400 guns per year were seized—half of all those seized from juveniles by the entire department.

Federal law enforcement also has an important role to play in limiting arrestee access to illegal firearms. Programs that make it more difficult (or impossible) to transfer firearms illegally—firearm traces and destruction—are needed.

Supportive interventions. The judiciary can seek support for including gun safety mandates in sentencing decrees. For example, offenders in certain categories could be required to relinquish their firearms during the adjudication process.

Hospital and medical trauma units could expand their mission to include followup counseling, referrals, and mentoring to victims, their associates, and perpetrators. Crisis intervention can be offered to victims and witnesses of firearm crime to provide support and encourage cooperation with the justice system. Mentoring programs

geared to young people in communities at high risk for firearm involvement show promise of success in encouraging prosocial behavior.

Coordination. Promising examples of the benefits of coordination can be found in a number of communities.

In Inglewood, California, offenders must submit to a search of their premises for firearms as a condition of probation or parole. Working in conjunction with local police, a probation officer has been assigned full time to conduct the searches, focusing specifically on gang members. In a single 6-month period this officer confiscated nearly 200 illegal firearms.

Working in conjunction with the Boston Police Department and the local office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, researchers report promising results from an initiative involving specific neighborhoods. Hot spots of gang-related gun violence have been identified. The police then target the gangs for felony, misdemeanor, and ordinance violations, invoking Federal prosecution (which carries longer sentences) whenever possible. The police and research staff meet with gangs to inform them of successful prosecutions, conveying information that has special meaning to gang members who attend.⁵

Before such innovations can be replicated elsewhere, research in program effectiveness is needed. Scientifically based, methodologically rigorous evaluative research can produce solid empirical data confirming the value of the response and its suitability for adoption by other jurisdictions struggling with illegal access to and use of firearms by offenders.

Notes

1. In this document, the terms “gun” and “firearm” are used interchangeably.
2. Blumstein, Alfred, “Youth Violence, Guns and the Illicit-Drug Industry,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 1994. This research was presented as part of NIJ’s Research in Progress seminar series. A videotape of the presentation (NCJ 152235) is available from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and elsewhere). Order from NCJRS at P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849–6000. To order by phone, call NCJRS at 800–851–3420 or e-mail askncjrs@ncjrs.org. A summary of the presentation is also available in NIJ’s Research in Progress Preview Series, *Youth Violence, Guns, and Illicit Drug Markets*, by Alfred Blumstein, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, June 1996 (FS 000129).
3. Sheley, J., J. Wright, and J.D. Smith, *Gun Acquisition and Possession in Selected Juvenile Samples*, Research in Brief, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Washington, D.C., 1995.
4. Sherman, Lawrence W., James W. Shaw, and Dennis P. Rogan, *The Kansas City Gun Experiment*, Research in Brief, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Washington, D.C., January 1995.
5. This research, by David M. Kennedy, was supported by the National Institute of Justice. A summary will be published in *Juvenile Gun Violence and Gun Markets in Boston*, Research Preview, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, forthcoming.

This study was conducted under NIJ grant #95-IJ-R-014 by Scott H. Decker, Ph.D., Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri-St. Louis; Susan Pennell, Director, Criminal Justice Research Division, San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG); and Ami Caldwell, Research Assistant, Criminal Justice Research Division, SANDAG.

Dr. Decker and Ms. Pennell presented preliminary findings of their study as part of NIJ's Research in Progress seminar series. A videotape

of the presentation, *Monitoring the Illegal Firearms Market*, is available from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and elsewhere). Ask for NCJ 153850 and order from NCJRS at P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000. You may also order by calling 800-851-3420 or by sending e-mail to askncjrs@ncjrs.org. Copies of the full report of the study, *Arrestees and Guns: Monitoring the Illegal Firearms Market: Final Report*, are available from NCJRS on a cost-recovery basis. Ask for NCJ 163497.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

NCJ 163496

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice

Washington, D.C. 20531

Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300

BULK RATE
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
DOJ/NIJ
Permit No. G-91