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National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

November 1986

The Armed Criminal in America

James D. Wright

Violent crime that threatens or abuses the physical safety of its victims lies at the heart of the crime problem in America today. In turn, the use of firearms to commit these crimes increases the seriousness of the violence problem. Each year, some 30,000 Americans die through the suicidal, homicidal, or accidental abuse of guns; several hundreds of thousands are injured; many hundreds of thousands more are victimized by gun crime. And the contribution of armed crime to the public's fear of crime is incalculable.

To shed light on armed crime, the National Institute of Justice recently sponsored a study that surveyed more than 1,800 convicted adult felons (all men) incarcerated in 10 States throughout the country. The survey asked these felons how and why they obtain, carry, and use firearms, especially in the commission of criminal acts.

This *Research in Brief* summarizes the results and policy implications of the study as they pertain to the nature of the criminal firearms market, criminal

firearms preferences, the motivation to own and carry guns, and how members of the survey sample thought they would respond to various types of gun regulation.

These results and implications apply only to the particular criminal population studied: serious adult male felons. Other groups, such as juvenile offenders, first offenders, female offenders, and less serious (nonfelony) adult male offenders may have very different patterns of firearms acquisition, ownership, and use. Therefore, they

From the Director

The armed predators who use guns in the course of their crimes are the source of much of the violence and fear that plague many urban neighborhoods. The debate over how to keep guns away from criminals has been intense and longstanding. Until recently, legislators and policymakers have had little empirical data to inform the debate.

If we are to achieve the goal of separating predators from guns, then we need to know how and where they obtain their weapons and how they use them in their criminal activities. This *Research in Brief* summarizes the findings of a National Institute-sponsored study that provided valuable new information about these questions. The knowledge produced by this study was cited by those involved in the policy debate over new gun control legislation passed by the Congress in 1986.

Based on interviews with more than 1,800 incarcerated felons, the study found that few of the gun-owning felons had bought their guns from a retail source. Rather, the majority usually obtained them from family members or friends or on the street. Often they stole them.

This research can help in the effort to develop more effective strategies to keep the predator from weapons of terror. The findings suggest that, for career criminals at least, vigorous enforcement and tougher penalties for those who commit crimes with firearms may be more effective than regulation. Our emphasis ought to be on "use a gun, go to jail."

New technology may also aid in the search for solutions. If we could do a better job of detecting concealed weapons, our emphasis would shift from efforts to control weapons at the point of purchase to identifying those

who are carrying and using guns for crime so they can be arrested and prosecuted.

NIJ is pursuing research toward a weapons-detection system that could reliably indicate concealed firearms. While much additional testing will be required before a system becomes operational, initial indications are promising.

All sides of the debate over gun control acknowledge that the use of weapons in crime is a major threat to the public and a pressing issue for policymakers. The National Institute is pleased that this research has contributed to informed discussion of the key issues. Advances in the technology of weapons detection may help shape new and more effective policies to help curb violent crime.

James K. Stewart
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may respond to entirely different criminal justice initiatives.

A typology of armed criminals

To facilitate analysis of the survey, the research developed a general typology of criminals based on their weapon use in crime. The largest group (39 percent) within the 7-category typology is the *unarmed criminal*, men who had never committed any crime while armed with a weapon and who function as a comparison group in most of our analysis.

Also defined are two groups of "armed—not-with-a-gun-criminals" (11 percent)—men who had committed armed crimes but never with a firearm. Based on the weapon used most frequently, this group is further divided into *knife criminals* and *improvisors*, the latter typically armed with a variety of ready-to-hand weapons.

The other half of the sample are *gun criminals*, who have been divided into four groups based on their frequency of gun use in crime: one-time firearm users (men who had committed one, but only one, gun crime); sporadics (men who had committed "a few" gun crimes); and two types of predators (men who had committed many gun crimes): handgun and shotgun predators, depending on what kind of gun they said they had used most frequently. Table 1 shows the distribution of the total sample across these seven categories.

Table 1 also shows the average "total criminality" score in each of the seven categories. (This score reflects the sum of all the crimes a felon reported ever having committed, weighted by the seriousness of each offense.) The results confirm that the felons identified as gun predators are overwhelmingly the most active criminals in the sample; the two predator groups (handgun and shotgun), who make up about 20 percent of the sample, account for approximately half the sample's total criminality.

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Table 1

Total criminality of offenders by typology of weapons used in crime

Criminal type	Number of offenders	Percent of total sample	Average "total criminality" score*
Total sample	1,874	100	139
Unarmed criminals	725	39	61
Armed not-with-a-gun criminals			
Improvisors	79	4	101
Knife criminals	134	7	109
Gun criminals			
One-time gun users	257	14	84
Sporadic gun users	257	14	151
Handgun predators	321	17	332
Shotgun predators	101	5	265

*"Total criminality" is an index measure or score reflecting the sum of all the crimes the felon had ever committed (as reported in the study questionnaire) weighted by the seriousness of each offense. The index numbers have no intrinsic meaning except that lower numbers mean fewer or less serious crimes and higher numbers mean more or more serious ones. The table shows the average score on this index for each group.

The nature of the criminal firearms market

Three-quarters of the sample said they had owned one or more firearms at some time in their lives. Seventy-nine percent of these—more than 1,000—said they had owned at least one handgun. The handgun owners responded to a number of detailed questions about the methods and sources they used to acquire their most recent handguns. Their answers provide previously unavailable details describing the nature of the criminal gun market. The principal results:

(1) Legitimate firearms retailers play only a minor role as direct sources of handguns for adult felony offenders.

Only about one-sixth of the gun-owning felons obtained their most recent handguns through a customary retail transaction involving a licensed firearms dealer. The remainder—five out of six—obtained them via informal, off-the-record transactions involving friends and associates,

family members, and various black market outlets. The means of acquisition from these informal sources included cash purchase, swaps and trades, borrowing and renting, and often theft. The criminal handgun market is overwhelmingly dominated by informal transactions and theft as mechanisms of supply.

The off-the-record nature of the market is further illustrated in the responses to a series of questions concerning the ease with which these men felt they could arm themselves upon release from prison. (As convicted felons, of course, all these men are legally prohibited from acquiring guns upon release, under provisions of the Gun Control Act of 1968 and the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968.) Most of the sample (gun owners and nonowners alike) thought it would be "no trouble at all" to acquire a gun upon release; about 80 percent felt they could obtain a suitable handgun in a few days or less. When asked where they would go for guns, their sources were friends, the street, and various black market sources.

These results suggest certain policy implications. Policies attempting to regulate handgun acquisition at the

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point of retail sale may be effective in preventing some types of criminals from acquiring firearms (e.g., juveniles or nonfelony offenders), but they are likely to have little effect on the most serious handgun-owning felons represented in this sample. Hardcore felons of the sort studied in this research rarely use customary retail channels to obtain handguns.

(2) Gun theft plays a critical role in connecting the adult felony offender to his firearms supply.

Half the men in the total sample had stolen at least one gun at some time in their lives (as shown in Figure 1). Many had stolen more than one. A few, particularly the more predatory felons, had stolen guns in extremely large numbers. At least 40 percent and perhaps as many as 70 percent of the most recent handguns owned by this sample were stolen weapons. These percentages include not only the guns that the felons stole themselves (32 percent), but also guns that the felons knew or believed to have been stolen prior to their acquisition of them.

Like other theft, gun theft appears to be an "opportunity" crime: most gun thieves (76 percent) stole guns when they came across them, not because they were looking specifically for a gun to steal. The purpose of most gun thefts (70 percent) was to sell or trade the gun to someone else, rather than to obtain one for personal use. Still, most of those who had ever stolen guns kept at least one of them for personal use, usually because the stolen gun was a better quality weapon than the gun they were carrying at that time.

Most gun thefts (84 percent) occurred in private residences, but thefts from "high-volume" sources (retailers, wholesalers, shippers, and manufacturers) were also widely reported. These high-volume thefts may in fact account for a larger share of the total volume of stolen guns, due to the potentially greater number of guns stolen per theft.

The ideal gun control policy would be one that directly affects the illicit user but leaves the legitimate user pretty much alone. Formulating such a policy, however, presupposes a sharp distinction between the licit and illicit markets, a distinction seriously eroded by the heavy volume of gun theft from legitimate owners. The survey data suggest that a successful policy for controlling criminal access to firearms must necessarily address the problem of gun theft, perhaps including measures for informing legitimate owners about the extent and seriousness of gun theft and about procedures for adequately securing their firearms.

Criminal firearms preferences

Many gun control policy proposals are targeted to particular classes of firearms: to handguns in general or, somewhat more commonly, to certain restricted classes of handguns, particularly the small, cheap, low-quality ones. The rationale for such proposals is two-fold: (1) legitimate gun owners have little or no need for or interest in

such firearms and (2) illegitimate gun owners do.

To assess the nature of the criminal demand for firearms, the survey asked for information on both the qualities the sample preferred in a handgun and the characteristics of the most recent handgun they had actually owned. Contrary to popular belief, neither line of questioning revealed much interest in small, cheap handguns among the adult felons in this sample. Such interest as was observed was concentrated among felons who had never used firearms to commit crimes.

The hardened firearms criminals in the sample both preferred to carry and actually carried relatively large, well-made weapons. The most common among the recent handguns owned was a Smith and Wesson .38 equipped with a 4-inch barrel. No more than a third of the most recent handguns owned by criminals would qualify as "snubbies" (barrel length of 3 inches or less), and only about 15 percent would qualify as "Saturday Night Specials."

Figure 1
Gun theft by criminal type



While the average price felons paid for their most recent handguns was not especially high—falling in the \$100 to \$200 range—the average quality of these guns was relatively high. Presumably, gun prices are heavily discounted in the markets exploited by these men.

Analysis of the relationship between types of firearms carried and extent of criminal activity revealed that the more a felon used his guns in crime, the higher the quality of the weapon he carried. Among the truly predatory criminals in the sample, the small, cheap handgun was definitely not the weapon of choice.

Much the same results were obtained in questions about *preferred* handgun characteristics. In general, far more interest was shown in features such as accuracy, firepower, traceability, and quality of construction, than price or size.

The study concluded from these findings that the strategy of purging the market of small, cheap handguns may be largely irrelevant to the felons most likely to commit gun crimes. It is, of course, possible that such handguns are much more important to first offenders, juveniles, or other classes of criminals. Gun criminals in this sample, however, did not have much interest in small, cheap handguns.

The motivation to own and carry guns

One reason criminals acquire and carry handguns is because many crimes are easier to commit if armed than if not. Beyond these obvious criminal motivations, however, the survey also shows that gun criminals own and carry guns because they were raised around guns and have owned and used them all their lives.

Most of them associated with other men who owned and carried guns as well. Furthermore, the majority tended to keep their guns loaded at all times and to fire them regularly, often at other people. Half the men in the sample claimed to have fired a gun at someone at some time; half also claimed to have been fired upon

(excluding military service in both cases).

In fact, many respondents stated that a man who is armed with a gun is “prepared for anything that might happen”—an opportunity to commit a crime or the need to defend oneself against the assaults or predations of others. Therefore, while handgun carrying among felons is in part a rational response to the nature of their criminal activities, it is, in equal measure, an element of the lifestyle arising from early socialization and from fear.

Given these results, it is not surprising that the major motive acknowledged for acquiring and carrying guns was self-protection. Concerning their most recently owned handgun, 58 percent of those who had ever owned a handgun cited “self-protection” as a very important reason for the acquisition; “to use in my crimes” was very important to only 28 percent. (“Self-protection,” in this context at least, must be interpreted with some caution. Part of it no doubt implies protection against being preyed upon or continually harassed by other criminals who are better armed. Another part implies protection against armed victims, against the police, and against the prospects of apprehension during a crime.)

In this connection, about two-fifths of the sample had at some time in their careers encountered an armed victim; an equivalent percentage had at some time decided *not* to commit a crime because they had reason to suspect that the intended victim was armed. (These findings, too, must be interpreted with caution. Although the survey did not ask who these “intended victims” were, it is likely that many would be the felons’ own “colleagues,” since men of the sort studied in this research are clearly not above preying upon one another.)

A third of the sample (of gun criminals only) made it a practice to carry a gun more or less all the time, as shown in

Figure 2

Patterns of handgun carrying by gun criminals

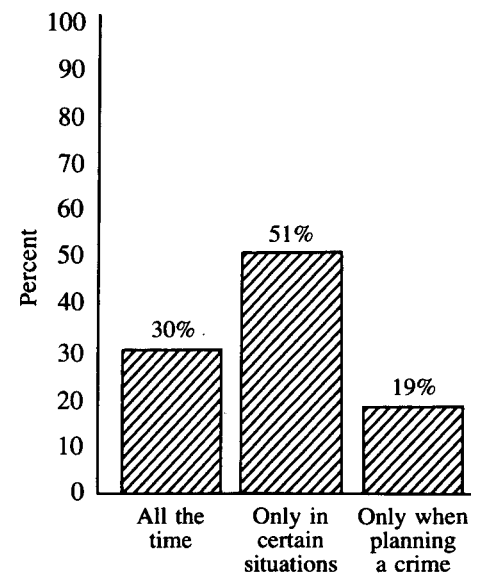


Figure 2. This ranged from about 10 percent for the one-time gun users to more than 50 percent for the handgun predators. Another half carried a gun whenever the circumstances seemed potentially dangerous—when doing a drug deal, when going out at night, when they were with other men carrying guns or, more generally, whenever their ability to defend themselves might be at issue. Only one in five of the gun criminals claimed that they carried a gun *only* when they intended to commit a specific crime. Consequently, the actual *use* of guns in crimes appears to be more a by-product of strongly ingrained gun-carrying habits, rather than the result of intentional planning for armed offenders.

The response of felons to gun policy measures

Proposals for new gun legislation surface with some regularity. The survey asked felons how they thought they would respond to some of these proposed measures. The results are obviously conjectural, but nonetheless of considerable interest as indicators of how felons themselves expect such measures would affect them.

First, the felons were asked what they thought they would do if "the cheapest handgun you could find cost more than you could possibly afford to pay." Among gun criminals, most said they would either borrow or steal the handgun they wanted; others said they would respond by carrying sawed-off shoulder weapons.

Next, they were asked what they would do in the face of a ban on small, cheap handguns. They overwhelmingly responded that they would carry bigger and more expensive handguns instead.

Finally, they were questioned about their possible response to a complete handgun ban. In answer to this question, a majority of the gun criminals—and more than three-quarters of the predators (the truly high-rate felons in the survey)—said that they would respond by carrying sawed-off shoulder weapons.

The general pattern is thus one of lateral or upward substitution: the weapons that gun criminals said they would carry under various hypothetical firearms bans were either just as lethal as, or more lethal than, the weapons they would have otherwise carried. The message these men seem to be sending is that their felonious activities would not suffer for lack of appropriate armament. Their intent, it seems, would be to find substitutes that might be somewhat less convenient, but would be at least as effective as their current weaponry. Given that their response predictions are accurate, the implication of these findings is that many commonly proposed gun control measures could

well prove to have unanticipated and counter-productive consequences—at least among the serious adult felons studied here.

Implications for gun policies

Findings from the survey suggest the following:

- Controls imposed at the point of retail sale would not be effective in preventing the acquisition of guns by serious adult felons because these felons rarely obtain their guns through customary retail outlets.
- Since theft of guns is a predominant means by which felons procure firearms, the 35 to 50 million handguns currently possessed by legitimate private owners represent a potentially rich source for criminal handgun acquisition. An effective criminal gun control policy must therefore, of necessity, confront the issue of firearms theft. At a minimum, there should be programs to educate the gun-owning public about the importance of adequately securing their guns.
- Among the most predatory felons, gun ownership and carrying is seen as essential because they fear what the prospects of an unarmed life on the streets would mean for their physical safety and security. For this group of most serious offenders, enhanced

sanctioning policies would be unlikely to pose much threat; for them, the cost of being caught unarmed in a dangerous situation would be many times greater than the cost of a few years in prison.

- For less predatory felons, however, sentence enhancement policies do seem to have an important deterrent effect, since a sizeable majority of the felons who do not use guns in crime cite "stiffer penalties" as a very important reason for their decision not to carry firearms.
- Finally, the survey findings suggest that, at least for the serious adult felons included in this sample, certain commonly proposed gun-banning measures could have strongly undesirable consequences, resulting in the substitution of more powerful and more lethal firearms. Gun-banning policies may be responded to differently by other types of offenders, however, and could represent a more effective deterrent to firearms use by juveniles, nonfelony offenders, and other types of criminals.

James D. Wright of the University of Massachusetts was the principal investigator on a study of firearms use in crime, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and published by the Institute in July 1985. A more complete version has recently been published as *Armed and Considered Dangerous: A Survey of Felons and Their Firearms* by James D. Wright and Peter H. Rossi (Hawthorne, New York: Aldine Publishing Co., 1986).