

Youth, Guns and Violence in Urban America

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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

YOUTH, GUNS AND VIOLENCE IN URBAN AMERICA

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The increasing violence committed by and against juveniles has come more and more to define the public's image of the crime problem and the larger political debate over anti-crime policy. While evidence documenting the growth of youth violence is abundant, serious research on the means and methods of this violence is scarce. This Research in Brief summarizes the results of our study, funded by the National Institute of Justice and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, concerning the number and types of firearms juveniles possess as well as where, how, and why juveniles acquire, carry, and use firearms. Findings derive from responses to self-administered questionnaires completed by 835 male inmates (mostly from urban areas) in six juvenile correctional facilities in California, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Illinois and 753 male students in ten inner-city public high schools near the correctional institutions surveyed. (The larger study also surveyed high school females, but findings from the female respondents are not reported here.) We focussed on these specific groups because they are popularly thought to engage in and experience violence, belong to street gangs, and engage in drug trafficking.

The average inmate respondent was seventeen years old; 84 percent were non-white; the modal educational attainment was tenth grade; only a quarter lived with both parents prior to their current incarceration. Among the

students, 97 percent were non-white; the mean age was sixteen; 44 percent lived in two-parent households. More than a third of the inmates had committed a murder; half had committed robbery; 65 percent had committed burglary. One in four had committed all three types of crime. As expected, the student sample was far less criminally inclined. Still, 42 percent of the students reported having been arrested or picked up by the police at least once; 22 percent had been arrested or picked up "many" times; 23 percent reported having stolen something worth at least \$50.

Both groups of respondents came from families where ownership and carrying of firearms were common. Ownership and carrying were also widespread among the respondents' peers; 89 percent of the inmates and 42 percent of the students had friends who carried firearms. Inmates and students alike existed in social environments of violence and victimization. Among incarcerated youth, for example, 84 percent reported that, prior to confinement, they themselves had been threatened with a gun or shot at and half had been stabbed with a knife. Among students, 45 percent had been threatened or shot at and 10 percent had been stabbed.

GUN POSSESSION

Eighty-three percent of the inmates had owned a gun at the time they were incarcerated (67 percent acquired their first firearm by the age of 14). A large majority of the sample (73 percent) had owned three or more types of guns in their lifetimes, and 54 percent had possessed three or more types of guns just prior to being locked up. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) had owned at least three firearms of any type just before being jailed. Relating guns to crime, nearly two-thirds of the inmates had used a gun to commit a crime, and more than half had fired a gun during a crime. By comparison, nearly a

third (30 percent) of the students had owned at least one gun in their lives, and 22 percent possessed a gun at the time the survey was completed.

Obviously, one need not actually own a gun in order to carry one. It is easy to imagine juveniles who carry guns borrowed from or otherwise made available by friends and family members. Indeed, among the inmate sample, carrying a firearm was about as common as owning one. But, among the high school sample, carrying a gun at least occasionally was more common than gun ownership. Twenty-two percent of the high school males owned a gun at the time of the survey. Yet, 12 percent of them reported currently carrying a gun "all" or "most of the time," and another 23 percent did so at least "now and then," for a combined total of 35 percent who carried firearms at least occasionally.

FIREARMS OF CHOICE

Despite the recent media attention given to automatic and military-style weapons, among incarcerated youth the revolver was the most commonly owned weapon; 72 percent had owned a revolver at some time in their lives, and 58 percent owned one at the time of their current incarceration. These guns generally were not small, cheap pistols (Saturday Night Specials). The most common calibers among the most recently owned revolvers of this sample were the .38 and the .357. Next in popularity was the automatic or semi-automatic pistol, typically chambered for 9 mm or .45 caliber rounds. Two-thirds of the sample had owned such a gun at some time; 55 percent owned one at the time of their incarceration. Shotguns, whether sawed-off or unaltered, had been owned by about 60 percent of the inmates. More than half the sample (51 percent) possessed a sawed-off shotgun at the time of their incarceration. Finally, nearly half of our respondents had owned a military-style rifle; 35

percent had owned one at the time they went to prison. Other types of guns (regular hunting rifles, derringers, zip guns, etc.) were owned at the time of incarceration by fewer than a quarter of the inmates.

(Table 1 about here)

The most commonly owned weapon among students was also the revolver (29 percent over the lifetime), followed by the automatic or semi-automatic pistol (27 percent). Fifteen percent possessed a revolver and 18 percent an automatic or semi-automatic handgun at the time of the study; 15 percent owned three or more guns when they were surveyed. As with the inmates, relatively few of the student's handguns were of the small, light, low-caliber variety. Shoulder weapons of all sorts were less likely to be owned by the students than handguns; still, 14 percent had owned a sawed off shotgun at some time, 14 percent had owned an unmodified shotgun, and 14 percent had owned a military-style rifle (six percent owned a military-style rifle at the time of the survey).

Absent additional data, it is hard to be certain which aspects of the pattern of ownership reflected preferences and which aspects reflected availability. Considering the ease with which the juveniles obtained firearms and the number and variety of guns apparently in circulation in their neighborhoods (see below), it is a reasonable assumption that they carried what they preferred to carry and that differential availability had little or nothing to do with it. There was an evident preference for concealable firearms (handguns and sawed-off shotguns), but hard-to-conceal shoulder weapons, whether military-style or not, were also quite common.

To gain some sense of what juveniles seek in a weapon, we asked respondents (both samples) what features they considered "very important" in

a handgun. The profile of desirable features was remarkably similar in both groups. Among inmates, the three highest rated traits were firepower, quality of construction, and untraceability, followed by ease of firing and accuracy. Among the students, quality of construction was the highest rated trait, followed by being easy to shoot, accurate, untraceable, and with high firepower. Neither inmates nor students indicated much preference for small, cheap guns, nor were they attracted to such ephemeral characteristics of weapons as "scary looking" or "good looking." The preference, clearly, was for high-firepower hand weapons that were well-made, accurate, easy to shoot and not easily traced.

OBTAINING A GUN

Media accounts suggest that most types of guns are relatively abundant and readily accessible to juveniles. In fact, 70 percent of the inmates ("upon release") and 41 percent of the students felt that they could get a gun with "no trouble at all;" an additional 17 percent of the inmates and 24 percent of the male students said it would be "only a little trouble." Only 13 percent of the inmates and 35 percent of the students perceived access to guns as a "lot of trouble" or "nearly impossible."

We asked both groups of respondents how they would go about getting a gun. Most felt there were numerous ways that they might obtain a firearm, but that family, friends, and street sources were the main sources. Drug dealers and junkies were the major suppliers after family, friends, and other street sources, this for both inmates and students. Purchasing a gun at a gunshop (or asking someone else to do so--see below) was perceived by 28 percent of the students as a reliable method; only 12 percent of the inmates considered it so (or viewed it as necessary). Theft was twice as likely to

be mentioned by the inmates as by the students although, relative to other sources, it was prominent for neither group.

While relatively few inmates mentioned theft as a means through which they would attempt to obtain a gun upon release, far more had actually stolen guns (50 percent for revolvers), usually from homes or cars. When the inmates sold or traded their guns, they generally did so to friends or other trusted persons. Thus, these juveniles both supplied guns to and obtained guns from the informal network of family, friends, and street sources. Many of the guns obtained from interpersonal networks and most obtained from street sources likely were stolen somewhere along the way. It seems then that theft and burglary are the ultimate source of many (perhaps most) of the guns that fall into the hands of juveniles, but only occasionally the proximate source. The firearms now in circulation (through theft or other means) are sufficiently numerous that a youth seeking a gun need only check his network of family, friends, and street contacts to obtain one.

Though by no means the preferred method of acquisition, purchasing a gun through legitimate channels was fairly common. Federal law bars juveniles from purchasing firearms through normal retail outlets, but the law is readily circumvented by persuading someone who is of legal age to make the purchase in one's behalf. Thirty-two percent of the inmates and 18 percent of the students had asked someone to purchase a gun for them in a gun shop, pawnshop, or other retail outlet. Forty-nine percent of the inmates and 52 percent of the students mentioned a friend as the person requested to buy a gun; 14 percent of the inmates and 18 percent of the students had turned to family members. Only seven percent and six percent of the inmates and students, respectively, had sought help from strangers. It seems, then, that

the inmates had access to an informal network that made gun acquisition cheaper and easier; turning to retail channels was possible but generally not necessary. Less streetwise and less hardened, perhaps, the students saw themselves as more dependent upon the retail shop if they needed a gun, although only 18 percent had ever used that source.

Aside from convenience, there is another good reason why juveniles prefer informal and street sources over normal retail outlets. Guns obtained from informal and street sources are considerably less expensive. The substantial majority of handguns and conventional shoulder weapons obtained by juveniles in this study in a cash transaction with an informal source were purchased for \$100 or less; most of the military-style rifles obtained from such sources were purchased for \$300 or less.

THE DECISION TO CARRY A GUN

The popular fear is that juveniles carry guns to prey on the rest of society. For the inmate sample, this fear is not unfounded. Sixty-three percent had committed crimes with guns. Forty percent had obtained a gun specifically for use in crime. Of those who reported committing "serious" crimes, 43 percent were "usually" or "always" armed with a gun during the process. Use in crime, however, was not the most important factor in the decision to own or carry guns, either for inmates or students. Nor was the gun principally a symbolic totem whose primary function was to impress one's peers. Impressing peers or others was among the least important reasons for purchasing a gun, regardless of weapon type and for students and inmates equally.

Instead, reasons for carrying a gun were dominated by themes of self-protection and self-preservation in the urban street environment. The most

frequent circumstances in which inmates carried guns were when they were in a strange area (66 percent), when they were out at night (58 percent), and whenever they thought they might need self-protection (69 percent). Likewise, for any of the types of guns purchased by either inmates or students, the desire for protection and the need to arm oneself against enemies were the primary reasons to obtain a gun. Use in crime or to "get someone" was relatively unimportant. The theme of self-protection was also evident in the circumstances in which our inmates had actually fired their guns. Three-quarters had fired a gun at a person at least once. Sixty-nine percent had fired in what they considered self-defense. More than half had also fired shots during crimes and drug deals. Better than six in ten had fired their weapons in fights and to scare someone.

(Table 2 about here)

DEALING GUNS

Given the means and sources of firearms acquisition for both inmates and high school students, it is obvious that there is a large, informal street market in guns, one in which the inmates were regular suppliers as well as frequent consumers. Forty-five percent could be described as gun dealers in that they had bought, sold, or traded a lot of guns. Of those who described themselves as dealers, the majority reported their most common source as theft from homes or cars and acquisitions from junkies. Sixteen percent had bought guns out-of-state for purposes of gun dealing; another seven percent had done so in-state; nearly one in ten had stolen guns in quantity from stores or off trucks during shipment.

There were two very different types of "gun dealers" in our sample. One was comprised of juveniles who occasionally came into possession of surplus

firearms and then sold or traded them to street sources. They may have come across firearms in the course of burglaries or break-ins, or taken firearms from junkies in exchange for drugs, but they were not systematically in the business of gun-dealing. The other group was more systematic in its gun-dealing activities and looked on gun deals as a business, seeking (if need be) to purchase guns both in and out of state to supply their consumers. This group would include (we assume) the one inmate in five who had gone (a few times or many times) to states "with very easy gun laws" to buy up guns for resale in their own neighborhoods. Those who had dealt guns, whether systematically or not, were more involved in gun use and criminal activity than those who had not dealt guns. They were more likely to carry a gun generally, more likely to own all types of weapons, more involved in shooting incidents, and more accepting of shooting someone to get something they want.

DRUGS AND GUNS

Much of the recent attention given to drugs and violence has centered on the so-called hard drugs, specifically heroin, cocaine, and smokable cocaine or "crack." Yet, alcohol and marijuana use was far more common among both inmates and students than was the use of harder drugs. Nearly 60 percent of the high school students had used alcohol at least a few times in the last year or so, and a quarter had used marijuana; any use of the harder drugs was reported by only 5 or 6 percent. The same patterns characterized the incarcerated juveniles: 82 percent had used alcohol at least occasionally in the year or so before their current incarceration, and 84 percent had used marijuana; but only 43 percent had used cocaine, 25 percent crack, and 21 percent heroin. Combining results across types of drugs, complete abstinence from drugs was characteristic of 40 percent of the high school students and

10 percent of the inmates. Still, regular, heavy use of substances was reported only by a minority of the respondents (the exception being alcohol use among the inmates).

Regarding the drugs-crime-guns nexus, we note two important findings. First, substantial numbers of non-users engaged in all the crime- and gun-related behaviors in question. For example, 44 percent of those inmates who never used heroin had committed robbery; 72 percent had fired a gun at someone. Second, drug users nonetheless were generally more likely than non-users to have been involved in crime and in most aspects of gun ownership and use. The relation of drug use to involvement in crime and gun activities was even more pronounced for alcohol and marijuana than for the harder drugs. Only involvement in homicide was unrelated to level of alcohol use. Among drug users of all types except heroin, involvement in crime and gun activity increased progressively with increased involvement.

DRUG DEALING AND GUN ACTIVITY

The majority of inmates (72 percent) and a surprising percentage of high school students (18 percent) had either themselves dealt drugs or worked for someone who did. Firearms were a common element in the drug business. Among those who had dealt drugs or had worked for dealers, 89 percent of the inmates and 75 percent of the students had carried guns generally. Of the inmate dealers, 60 percent were very likely to carry guns during drug transactions, and 63 percent had fired guns during those transactions. As well, 43 percent of the inmates said that all or most of the drug dealers they knew also dealt in guns. Nearly half of the inmates who had ever stolen guns had also sold at least some of them to drug dealers. Six percent of those who had dealt guns had bought guns from drug dealers; 26 percent of the

gun dealers had obtained guns from junkies. Clearly, dealers, junkies, and drugs are common threads in the illicit firearms market. The street economy is not comprised of specialists. Instead, there is a generalized commerce in illegal goods wherein guns, drugs, and other illicit commodities are bought, sold, and traded.

GANGS AND GUNS

The notion of a link between gangs and gun-related violence is common in most discussions of crime in the nation's urban centers. We classified gangs into three types: (1) quasi-gang: a group with whom the respondent identifies but does not define as an organized gang; (2) unstructured gang: a group that is considered an organized gang by the respondent but that has fewer than 10 members or has few of the trappings normally associated with gangs (i.e., an "official" name, an "official" leader, regular meetings, designated clothing, and a specified turf); and (3) structured gang: a group that is considered an organized gang by the respondent, has at least 10 members, and has at least four of the trappings normally associated with gangs. Sixty-eight percent of the inmates and 22 percent of the students were affiliated with a gang or quasi-gang.

As with the relation between drugs and criminal and gun-related activity, it is important to note that substantial portions of our sample who were not affiliated with gangs were heavily involved in guns and crime. Yet, we found a undeniable relationship between gangs and crime. For the inmate sample, quasi-gang members consistently reported their groups and themselves as less involved in criminal behavior than did the members of unstructured and structured gangs. Gang members of all types were considerably higher in crime than were non-gang inmates. For students, structured gang members

generally exceeded quasi-gang members in their criminal activities though members of quasi-gangs were more involved in criminal behavior than were unstructured gang members. As well, for the inmate sample, both structured and unstructured gangs were high in drug use relative to the quasi-gangs. For the student sample, unstructured gangs were less involved in drugs than were structured and quasi-gangs. For both samples, drug selling was more common among gangs than was drug use.

For the inmates and, to a lesser extent, the students as well, movement from non-gang member through membership in the various types of gangs brought increases in most forms of gun-related behaviors. Among inmates, more than nine in ten members of structured gangs said their gang possessed "a stash of guns members could use when they wanted to" and an equal proportion described guns as plentiful "whenever the gang got together." Nearly half (45 percent) described gun thefts as a regular gang activity; two-thirds (68 percent) said their gang regularly bought and sold guns. Sixty-one percent described "driving around shooting at people you didn't like" as a regular gang activity.

For the student sample, gang members exceeded non-gang-members, and both structured and unstructured gangs generally exceeded quasi-gangs in involvement in gun activity (the exception is found in the quasi-gang's greater likelihood to have a "stash" of guns). However, unstructured gangs were less likely to engage in drive-by shootings and were less likely even than quasi-gangs to require gun ownership and gun-use skill of new members.

Of some special interest, findings from both samples indicate that members of structured gangs were less likely than members of unstructured gangs (for students, even less than those of quasi-gangs) to possess

military-style rifles. The preferred (or, at least, most commonly owned) weapon for respondents of both samples was the revolver, although ownership of military-style weapons among gang-affiliated inmates was quite widespread.

(Table 3 about here)

IMPLICATIONS

Owning and carrying guns are fairly common behaviors among segments of inner-city youth--in the present study, among youth with records of serious crime and among students in troubled inner-city schools. Perhaps the most striking of our findings is the quality of firearms these youth possessed. High-quality guns were easily and cheaply obtained by the juveniles we surveyed, and rarely through legitimate channels. For the majority of our respondents, self-protection in a hostile and violent world was the chief reason to own and carry a gun. Drug use and sales are seriously implicated in the youth-gun problem, but to characterize either as directly causal is likely incorrect. The same may be said of the association between gangs and guns. While the link is apparent, it is not at all clear whether gangs cause gun use or whether they simply offer safer harbor and encouragement to youth already well acquainted with guns and the perceived need for them.

Most of the methods of obtaining guns exploited by the juveniles we studied are already against the law. The problem is not that the appropriate laws do not exist but that the laws that do exist either are not or cannot be enforced, and that persons involved in firearms transactions with juveniles are not concerned with the legality of the transaction. Given these facts, it is unlikely that "gun control" by itself represents an adequate solution. Informal commerce in small arms involving purchases, swaps and trades among private parties is difficult to regulate, is exploited

by juveniles as well as adults to obtain guns, and successfully subverts legal measures designed to prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands.

From the viewpoint of policy, we think it matters less where juveniles get their guns than where they get the idea that it is acceptable to use them. The problem is less one of getting guns out of the hands of juveniles and more one of reducing motivations for youth to arm themselves in the first place. Our respondents were strongly, not weakly, motivated to own and carry guns. Convincing inner-city juveniles (or adults) not to own, carry, and use guns will therefore require convincing them that they can survive in their neighborhoods without being armed, or in other words, that the customary agents of social control can be relied upon to provide for personal security. Until this becomes true, guns in the inner city will remain widespread.

Gangs and drugs worsen the problems of inner-city juvenile violence but are themselves the symptoms (not the causes) of a more general unraveling of norms, values, and expectations that otherwise constrain behavior. What has arisen in the central city is a youth subculture (perhaps characteristic of a relatively small percentage of inner-city youth but one that increasingly delineates the conditions of life for the majority of inner-city residents) that is defined by estrangement from--indeed, hostility to--the norms and conventions of the larger society. Many of the terms of debate in the contemporary discussion of juvenile violence--drugs, gangs, even guns themselves--prove to be epiphenomenal. Guns, drugs, gangs, crime, and violence are all expressions of a pervasive alienation of inner city youth. Isolation, hopelessness, and fatalism, coupled with the steady deterioration of stabilizing social institutions in the inner city and the inability of the

police to maintain security, breed an environment where "success" implies predation and survival depends on one's ability to defend against it. So long as these conditions remain, so too will crime and violence.

Table 1: Inmate and Student Gun Possession (Ns in parentheses)

	% Inmates Who Owned Just Prior To Confinement	% Students Who Owned At Time of Survey
Any Type of Gun	83 (815)	22 (741)
Target or Hunting Rifle	22 (823)	8 (728)
Military-Style Automatic or Semi-Automatic Rifle	35 (823)	6 (728)
Regular Shotgun	39 (823)	10 (728)
Sawed-Off Shotgun	51 (823)	9 (728)
Revolver	58 (823)	15 (728)
Automatic or Semi-Automatic Handgun	55 (823)	18 (728)
Derringer or Single-Shot Handgun	19 (822)	4 (727)
Homemade (ZIP) Handgun	6 (823)	4 (727)
3 or more Types of Guns	54 (822)	6 (727)
3 or More of Any Type of Gun	65 (815)	15 (741)

Table 2: "Very Important" Reasons for Most Recent Gun Purchase

Gun Type	% Stating That Each Reason Was "Very Important"	
	Inmates	Students
<u>Military-Style Guns</u>	(N = 335)	(N = 83)
protection	73	75
enemies had guns	60	42
use in crimes	40	a
to get someone	43	25
friends had one	20	16
to impress people	10	9
to sell	11	6
<u>Handguns</u>	(N = 611)	(N = 180)
protection	74	70
enemies had guns	52	28
use in crimes	36	a
get someone	37	13
friends had one	16	7
to impress people	10	10
to sell	10	4
<u>Rifles or Shotguns</u>	(N = 470)	(N = 107)
protection	64	59
enemies had guns	47	29
use in crimes	35	a
get someone	37	20
friends had one	16	5
to impress people	10	7
to sell	10	8

^a Item not asked of student sample.

Table 3: Gangs and Gun Activity -- Inmate Sample (Ns in Parentheses)

Item	Gang Type*			No	
	Quasi	Unstructured	Structured	Gang	
<u>Gang Activities</u>					
% with stash of guns	64	76	93	--	(442)
% with guns "plentiful"	64	85	88	--	(442)
% that steals guns regularly	26	39	45	--	(430)
% that buys and sells guns regularly	37	62	68	--	(437)
% that shoots guns regularly	55	73	86	--	(439)
% that regularly do "drive-by" shootings	35	58	61	--	(442)
% most of whose members carry guns	67	83	90	--	(440)
% that required gun ownership	11	11	28	--	(446)
% that required gun-use skill	17	16	22	--	(439)
<u>Individual Respondent Activities</u>					
% owned military style rifle	35	64	58	33	(646)
% owned regular shotgun	54	73	73	42	(645)
% owned sawed-off shotgun	62	70	76	44	(647)
% owned a revolver	70	81	81	57	(646)
% owned an automatic handgun	65	72	75	54	(654)
% carrying gun "all" or "most of the time	53	60	73	33	(645)
% who fired a gun at someone	72	87	89	58	(619)

*"Quasi-gang" = Group of people, not a gang.

"Unstructured" = Gang that has fewer than 10 members and/or has fewer than four "official" gang trappings.

"Structured" = Gang with 10 or more members and at least four "official" gang trappings.

"No Gang" = respondent claims no gang activity of any sort.