



POSSESSION AND CARRYING OF FIREARMS AMONG A SAMPLE
OF INNER-CITY HIGH SCHOOL FEMALES

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POSSESSION AND CARRYING OF FIREARMS AMONG A SAMPLE
OF INNER-CITY HIGH SCHOOL FEMALES

Much of the current concern about crime in American society centers on the issue of violence among youth. Special attention has been given in the popular media as well as in congressional hearings to the carrying and utilization of firearms by youthful offenders (Lautman 1991). The perpetrators, as well as victims, of this violence are overwhelmingly portrayed as young males (cf. Mitchell 1993; Norland 1992; Treaster and Taylor 1992; Wolf 1990; Gest 1989). Without question, young males are both the dominant perpetrators and victims of urban violence, and this dominance has influenced criminological research questions (Chesney-Lind 1989). However, research on the criminal offending of juveniles finds that the typical sociodemographic profile (minority, socially and economically disadvantaged) of a female offender is virtually identical to that of her male counterpart. Further, the pattern of criminal activities by females, save for the most serious of violent offenses, greatly resembles the activities of young male offenders (for summary reviews of the female delinquency literature, see Steffensmeier and Allan 1991; Smith and Paternoster 1987; Crites 1976; also, see Wolfe, Cullen, and Cullen 1984; Canter 1982).

Given these similarities, there is no reason to assume that females engage in no violent behavior at all. In this vein, and recalling our earlier point that much of the present concern regarding violence is focused on the possession of guns among youths, we find little in the research literature by way of studies which explore the extent to which young females acquire and carry guns. We know only that in the thirty-day period preceding a survey of 11,631 students in grades nine through twelve in the United States in 1990,

eight percent of the female respondents had carried a weapon to school; the weapons may or may not have been firearms (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1991). We know that nearly seven percent of the females in a sample of public high school students in a Midwestern city had carried an unspecified weapon to school at least once over the course of a year; males were four times as likely to have done this (Asmussen 1992). We have learned as well that 1.5 percent of the females in a 1990 sample of Seattle eleventh-grade students reported owning a handgun (Callahan and Rivara 1992).

Seeking to address this research imbalance, we report here the results of a study which ascertains patterns of gun acquisition and gun carrying among a sample of young females at particularly high risk of involvement in gun-related activity -- inner-city high school students (for studies of risk of victimization among inner-city youth, on and off school property, see Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985, Hellman and Beaton 1986; Schubiner, Scott, and Tzelepis 1992; Sheley, McGee, and Wright 1992).

METHOD

Sample

The analyses reported here derive from responses to self-administered questionnaires completed by 735 female students in ten inner-city high schools in the Spring of 1991. The schools in which the survey occurred were located in five cities near state correctional facilities that were part of a related study.¹ In all cases, local school administrators viewed the topic of guns

¹Site selection was tied to the needs of a larger study of weapons acquisition among juveniles that required simultaneous entry into state correctional systems and local school systems. From a larger universe of such dual-entry possibilities, the resultant sample represents the only ones ultimately to provide entry.

and violence among students as highly politically charged. They consented to our research only upon the guarantee that their districts and schools would not be identified in the publication of our research results. Respecting their wishes, we note here only that we obtained responses from schools in large prominent cities in California, Illinois, Louisiana, and New Jersey. Schools selected for study were identified by the administrators as inner-city schools that had experienced firearms incidents in the recent past and whose students likely encountered gun-related violence (as victims, perpetrators, or bystanders) out of school.² Enrollments in these schools ranged from 900 to 2,100.

The survey was introduced to students as a national study of firearms and violence among youth. The questionnaire consisted primarily of forced-choice items dealing with gun ownership, carrying, and acquisition. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Spanish versions of the survey were offered to students who desired them. Number of students surveyed per school averaged 165 (within a range of 109 to 229). Percentage of student populations surveyed across schools ranged from seven to 21 (with a mean of 10 percent; lower percentages were a function of larger-size schools). In some schools, the survey was administered to groups of 20 to 30 students at a time. In others, it was given to larger assemblies of 100 to 200 students. In four of the ten schools sampled, students were offered \$5.00 to participate

²We have no formal evidence by which to document these claims. However, interviews with the faculty and students of these schools during the administration of our survey confirmed the administrators' assessments. In one school, our surveyors observed a student take a gun from his jacket in order to examine it before responding to a questionnaire item about caliber. As well, in the time since administration of the survey, three of the schools have experienced violent episodes sufficient to gain national media attention.

in the survey. Neither financial inducement nor method of distribution more generally was tied to percentage of the student body participating in the survey or to response variation across questionnaire items.

Since our selection of schools was not random (i.e., was focused only on schools with high-violence profiles), since participation in the study was voluntary, and since we had no access to students absent on the day of the survey, we cannot claim that the students we questioned were representative of inner-city students generally nor necessarily representative of students in the schools we visited. Yet, principals and teachers indicated that they considered them representative of their students.³ As a limited check on this perception, we had ascertained from the schools, prior to administration of our survey, estimates of the racial and ethnic distribution of their students. In all instances, distributions within our samples fell within four percent of those of the larger populations.⁴ Additionally, as expected,

³Principals were asked to grant us access to 150 to 200 students in each of the schools we entered and, within the practical constraints faced by principals and teachers, to make the sample -- students in grades nine through twelve -- as representative of their pupils as possible. In six instances, principals arranged for the survey to take place during homeroom periods. These periods were uniform for the student body; thus, theoretically, we had access to the entire student population. In two schools, the survey was given during the physical education hours, and in two schools, we were granted access to all students enrolled in social studies courses. In the former two sites, physical education was mandatory and its hours were uniform for all students; thus, here too, theoretically, we had access to all students. In the two sites in which we entered social studies courses, our access to the entire students body was more limited.

⁴As well, a 1984 study of inner-city high school students' criminal behavior permits a limited assessment of comparability concerning selected characteristics. In that study, Fagan, Piper, and Moore (1986) and Fagan, Piper, and Cheng (1987) employed data collected from randomly selected high school

responses to the questionnaire items displayed some variation across schools, but reflected no systematic site-to-site patterns.

Respondent Characteristics

As the respondent profile in Table 1 indicates, 78 percent of the students were black; only two percent of the students were white. The Hispanic and Asian portions of the sample (13 percent and four percent, respectively) were found predominantly in the California schools. Most students were between 15 and 17 years old (mean age = 16); the modal grade level was tenth.

Table 1 about here

Missing Data

Missing data were expected given that the survey was long, that time limits were imposed on some respondents by their institutions, and that respondents had been told that answering any given item in the survey was discretionary. Analysis of the missing data in the present study suggests that most stems from time constraints. That is, the vast majority of incomplete items occurred at the end of the survey, and these were more characteristic of respondents who had to leave the survey setting at a given

students from inner-city, high-crime neighborhoods in the Bronx, Dallas, Miami, and Chicago. Age and race breakdowns for their samples are similar to the present one. A lower percentage of our respondents lived in single-parent households. Use of the drugs of interest to Fagan et al. was the same for both samples though the present sample was considerably more likely to have sold drugs. The discrepancy may result from our use of students from specifically identified "problem" schools as opposed to the use by Fagan et al. of randomly sampled students in schools in "problem" neighborhoods.

time for a mandatory class or activity.⁵

The primary issue regarding missing cases is whether or not those who responded to items differed from those who did not. To address this issue, missing cases on those items used in the present analysis were contrasted with responding cases controlling for research site, race/ethnicity, and age. Missing and responding cases differed little. As a further check, all analyses reported below were rerun substituting predicted values for all missing cases (Anderson, Basilevsky, and Hum 1983). The results were substantially unchanged.

Reliability and Validity

Self-report data are absolutely necessary to the study of most types of deviance committed by individuals. However, the issues of reliability and validity cast large shadows upon self-reported criminality (including gun-related activity). Researchers can never be certain that respondents are answering their questions accurately and honestly.⁶

⁵ Missing cases averaged 14.8 percent per item within a range of 3.4 to 23.6 percent (the final item on the survey). Randomly crosstabulating any two items that appeared in the first two-thirds of the questionnaire, we found little in the way of systematic non-response (as opposed to that associated with incompleteness of items in the last third of the survey due to time limitation). Average percentage of respondents who failed to complete both items in any set was 3.4 percent within a range of .8 to 3.7 percent.

⁶ Self-reported criminality data probably suffer less from problems of reliability and validity than most observers would guess (Horney and Marshall 1992). Using polygraph tests, for example, Clark and Tiffet (1966) found most responses by juveniles to self-report items truthful (see also Akers et al. 1983). Researchers (Elliott and Voss 1974; Hardt and Peterson-Hardt 1977; Hirschi 1969) have found that few respondents who report no offenses have police records. Others have established that self-report data generally are free of dishonesty by questioning the respondents' peers and teachers about the veracity of their

Attempts to establish level of reliability in the present study centered on responses to a number of items. In each reliability test, responses to a pair of items were checked for logical consistency. For example, respondents who claimed never to have owned a military style weapon at any time in their lives should not have responded affirmatively to a later item regarding ownership of such a weapon at the time of the survey. Eleven such items were examined for the present sample. Inconsistent responses averaged 1.3 percent within a range of .5 to 2.8 percent. To determine how systematic were the inconsistencies, we scored each respondent on number of inconsistent answers. Respondents received scores between zero and 11. Less than one percent scored above two; no score exceeded four.

Validity is more difficult to assess, since we have no official records against which to compare our self-report data and since little prior literature exists by which we can roughly gauge the comparability of our respondents' claims. We can note only that the findings reported below do not depart radically from those few reviewed above concerning weapons-possession by female juveniles.

RESULTS

The following sections explore various components of the female students' responses to a variety of questions concerning their knowledge of and participation in gun ownership and carrying. To provide a basis for

statements. Farrington (1973) noted that 75 percent of the self-reported delinquency in one study was re-reported in a second study two years later. Indeed, systematic reviews of the literature generally have accorded self-reported criminality data fairly high marks (Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1981:114; O'Brien 1985). To the extent problems have arisen, they have indicated that more seriously criminal respondents are more subject to memory lapses and telescoping of their reports.

comparison, results from male students' responses to the same items (as reported in Sheley, Wright, and Smith 1993) are included in footnotes which supplement the text.

Exposure to Firearms

Before considering the topic of gun acquisition and possession among our inner-city female student sample, we first establish the general milieu in which any findings must be considered. As shown in Table 2, the female students of our sample recognized the presence of firearms as a characteristic of their immediate environment. A substantial majority (68 percent) of respondents reported that males in their family owned guns, with 30 percent indicating that most or all of their male relatives owned some type of gun. Further, a substantial percentage (42) reported that these same males carried guns outside the home on some occasions. To a somewhat lesser degree, the respondents reported that nearly a third of their friends owned guns, with a slightly smaller percentage (28) indicating that these friends carried their guns outside the home at least occasionally. Perhaps more disturbing, 45 percent noted that they knew of at least one person who had carried a gun to school within the past year, while five percent indicated that they knew of many persons who had done so.⁷

⁷Responses from male students indicated similar levels of gun ownership and carrying among their male family members (69 and 37 percent respectively), but substantially higher levels among their friends -- 57 percent said their friends owned guns while 42 percent said that their friends carried guns on some occasion.

Table 2 about here

Victimization

A last set of items in Table 2 suggests that a number of the respondents had been exposed in some fashion to gun-related violence. In terms of direct experience, 13 percent reported that they had been threatened with a gun "in the last few years" while travelling to and from school.⁸ Further, six percent of the sample said that they actually had been shot at on at least one occasion, with two percent indicating that this event had happened "a few" or "many" times. In a more indirect manner, the sample reported that classmates also had had a high level of victimization experiences involving guns. For instance, 43 percent of the females said that they knew someone personally who had been threatened with a gun while a slightly higher percentage (45) knew of someone who had been shot at. In short, nearly half of the sample were acquainted with peers who had been victims of gun-related violence.⁹

⁸This question was posed in conjunction with other items pertinent to school-related violence. We surmise, however, that had this question been broadened by eliminating the "to and from school" clause, the number of females threatened with a gun may have been even higher.

⁹As might be expected, the reported personal victimization experiences of males were even higher. Twenty-eight percent of the males indicated that they had been threatened with a gun (12 percent indicating more than once) while twenty percent said that they actually had been shot at (10 percent responding "just once" with an additional 10 percent saying more than once).

In contrast, the reported gun-related victimization of persons known to them was quite similar to that reported by the female sample. Fifty-three percent of the males said that they knew of friends who had been threatened with a gun; an identical proportion indicated also that they knew of friends who had been shot at. In essence, there was a pronounced difference in the reported personal victimization experiences of the male students,

Access to Guns

Given the rather widespread possession of guns among their family and friends, it is no surprise that a substantial majority of the respondents felt that they could obtain a gun themselves if they desired. As revealed in Table 2, nearly half of the sample assumed that they could obtain a gun either with little or no trouble. Conversely, less than a third of the respondents expressed the belief that guns would be almost impossible for them to obtain.¹⁰

Taken together, the results shown in Table 2 make clear that the female students in our sample were keenly aware of the presence of guns in their social environments. Both the ownership and carrying of firearms were common among their family and friends, a fact undoubtedly contributing to the belief among a large portion of our sample that they themselves could obtain a gun if they desired to do so. Apparently, there is a price to be paid for this gun-laden environment, as evidenced by the substantial portion of our sample (and even more so, their friends) who were no strangers to the real and potential dangers of gun-related violence.

Gun Possession and Carrying

Turning to the specific interest of this study, we examine the reported patterns of gun carrying among our sample of female inner-city high school students. Responses to questions regarding gun ownership are shown in Table

but the indirect experience of gun-related violence was quite similar for both males and females.

¹⁰Males were even more confident that they could obtain a gun with ease. In contrast to the females, 64 percent of the males thought that they could obtain a firearm with either no or only a little trouble; only 18 percent felt that it would be impossible to do so.

3. Overall, 12 percent (roughly one in eight) of the sample reported that they had "ever" owned some type of firearm. Among the various options offered, nine percent of the sample reported having owned a revolver, the most popular type of firearm possessed by the sample. Interestingly, the next most common firearm reported as owned was a shotgun (seven percent), followed by other types of handguns such as an automatic or semiautomatic (five percent) or derringer (four percent). Among guns currently in the students' possession, revolvers were again reported as most likely to be owned, with six percent claiming to have one in their possession. Shotguns and automatic/semi-automatic handguns were the next most popular, as four percent of the sample reported that they owned one or the other.

Table 3 about here

Gun ownership aside, whether guns are carried outside the home by the female students in this sample remains an issue. Responses to a question concerning gun carrying are shown in Table 4. While 89 percent of the sample reported that they never carried firearms, eleven percent indicated that they carried a gun at least "now and then." However, only a small percentage (one percent) said that they did so "all the time." Somewhat in contrast, only three percent of the students reported carrying a gun to school on some occasion, with less than one percent claiming to do so "all the time." It appears, then, that reasonable numbers of the females in our sample owned and occasionally carried guns though, by far, they engaged in this latter behavior

outside of school.¹¹

 Table 4 about here

Motives for Gun Carrying

Given the level of gun ownership and carrying reported by our sample, we were interested in respondents' motives for obtaining firearms. Shown in Table 5 are responses from those who reported possessing a handgun (the most commonly owned gun) concerning why they obtained one. By far, the major reason cited was "protection." Virtually all those possessing a handgun cited this factor, 89 percent terming it "very important." Presumably in the same vein, 52 percent felt it was important to be armed because they believed their enemies had guns. Beyond this, a host of other reasons were reported, though they assumed considerably less importance. Roughly 27 percent reported that they wanted a handgun "to get someone," though only nine percent said this was "very important." Even fewer said they obtained handguns because their friends had them, to impress people, or to sell.¹²

¹¹ The reported gun ownership and carrying among females, while more than might be expected, is considerably less than that of their male counterparts. Thirty percent of the male students reported ever owning some type of gun while 22 percent said that they currently owned one. Further, 35 percent of the males responded that they carried a gun outside of school and 9 percent had carried one to school at least once. Thus, while the gun ownership and carrying among our sample of female students was higher than might be commonly assumed, with roughly one in ten reporting that they occasionally carried a gun, this occurrence still lags considerably behind that of their male classmates, especially in terms of carrying a firearm to the school which they attend.

¹² These results resemble those of the respondents' male counterparts. For instance, 70 percent of the male students designated "to protect myself" as a very important reason for

Table 5 about here

Acquisition of Firearms

In Table 6 we turn to the issue of the means by which inner-city female youth obtain firearms. We examine responses to a question regarding the respondents' likely sources of obtaining firearms should they desire to do so. Allowing for multiple responses, a majority of the sample (51 percent) cited simply borrowing a gun from a family member or friend as a probable source. Thirty-one percent said also that they would purchase a firearm from that same source. Surprisingly, the next most common response (34 percent) was to buy one from a gunshop. It is not clear whether this represents a misperception among the students that they could buy a gun regardless of their age (though we note that eighteen year-olds could indeed legally purchase a rifle), or whether knowledge of widespread illegal (i.e., under age) purchases leads this to be recognized as a possible source. Nor is it clear that the respondents in question actually envisioned entering a gunshop themselves or asking someone of majority age to purchase a gun for them.

obtaining their most recent handgun. While this emphasis on self protection was somewhat less pronounced than those of females, the ordering of importance of the other items was virtually identical, with the actual percentages of the two groups being quite close (e.g., reasons listed as "very important" for males: enemies carry guns, 28; to get someone, 13; to impress people, 10; friends carry guns, 7; and to sell, 4). In essence, a considerably greater proportion of males own and carry guns; yet, the given reasons for doing so, falling largely within the realm of self defense, were essentially the same among both male and female students.

Table 6 about here

To aid in our understanding of this response, we refer to another item in the survey which tests the students' knowledge of some gun laws. One of these items is posed as a true/false statement: "You must be 21 years old to legally buy a handgun in the U.S." Of the 773 responses, 61 percent believed this to be an accurate statement, while the remainder felt it to be false or indicated that they did not know. Further, we isolated the responses of those who said they would use this source. Surprisingly, a substantial majority of this group (91 percent [N = 294]) indicated that it was illegal for a minor to purchase a handgun. These results suggest that most of the sample realized that commercial purchase of a handgun would be illegal; that does not rule out, of course, that many of the students believed such purchases were still possible.

Other potential sources of acquisition included purchase from "off the street" (mentioned by 25 percent as a possible source), with 17 percent identifying specifically a drug dealer as a possible source. Other means of obtaining a firearm, ranging from acquiring one from a drug user to stealing one from various sources, were also seen as possibilities, but were mentioned only by small percentages of the sample.

In sum, the females in our sample did not believe that they would have to resort to exotic measures to obtain a firearm. Instead, they seemed to feel that should they desire to get a gun, some family member or friend would be willing to accommodate them, either through a loan or by selling them one. In addition, and whether or not erroneously, a third of the respondents indicated

that they simply would purchase one from a retail outlet. While a number of street sources were recognized also as potential means of acquisition, their perceived desirability paled in comparison to sources more closely acquainted with the respondents.¹³ This finding may well explain an assumption discussed earlier, one in which over two-thirds of the sample indicated that it would be relatively easy to obtain a firearm.

While the foregoing discussion concentrated on means thought by the sample to be potential avenues of gun acquisition, another item in the survey asked specifically where respondents actually had obtained firearms. Focusing again on the most commonly possessed firearm, reported modes of acquiring handguns are shown for that portion of the sample claiming to have done so. As shown in Table 7, friends and family emerged by far as the primary means of obtaining handguns -- combined, 71 percent of the sample cited these two sources. Again, purchases from gun stores appeared as a source, with nine percent of the sample claiming to have gotten their handguns there. We note again that, since our respondents were under the age of 21, all purchases of this nature would be illegal; we assume therefore that those claiming this as a source of their handgun acquisition referred to use of a confederate above the age of 21 to purchase the gun. Street sources, as well as those involved in drug sales and use, were also mentioned, though to a considerably lesser

¹³This pattern was replicated among the male respondents, who showed even more propensity for assuming that guns could be obtained from sources close to them. "Borrowing one from a family member or friend" was the males' most likely stated source (53 percent), followed by "getting one off the street" (37 percent) and "buy one from a family member or friend" (35 percent). The only item which a greater percentage of females designated as a potential source was a gun shop (34 percent of the females compared to 28 percent of the males).

degree than family and friends.¹⁴ Clearly, the respondents thought that they could turn to those with whom they were closely associated to obtain firearms. And, according to the reports of those claiming actually to have acquired a gun, this was a reasonably valid assumption.

Table 7 about here

Having established the general patterns of ownership and acquisition, we consider more specifically the issue of who among our sample actually possessed firearms. In another report addressing the same concern with a sample of male students (Sheley et al. 1993), we noted that drug use and membership in gangs were both predictors of gun possession and gun carrying.¹⁵ Here we explore whether this pattern holds true for females by

¹⁴A very similar pattern of handgun acquisition emerged when the responses of the male students were analyzed. Like females, male students reported that friends (38 percent) and a family member (23 percent) were the primary sources of acquiring a handgun; together, these sources accounted for over 60 percent of the handgun acquisitions reported by the male sample. In addition, sources "off the street" were reported by 14 percent of the sample, followed by a gun shop (11 percent; again, we note that handgun acquisition from a retail outlet was illegal for all of the respondents), then drug dealer/junkie (9 percent). All other accounted for only 5 percent of those reported by the males. While males are much more likely than females to report the acquisition of a gun, it is clear that their sources are hardly more exotic, tending as they do toward persons closely associated with the respondent.

¹⁵Essentially, results from the male sample found drug use to be less than might be commonly assumed (e.g., the percentages of males ever having used heroin, cocaine, and crack were 5, 6, and 5 respectively). However, to the extent that drug use of any kind increased, so did gun possession and gun carrying. Similarly, males involved in gang activities also displayed higher levels of gun possession and use, particularly as the involvement tended toward more structured forms of gangs.

examining the data presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Drugs and Guns

For our purposes, drug use was operationalized as self-reported use, during the past two years, of items from a list of illegal drugs. By far, alcohol was the drug most commonly used by the respondents (60 percent), with marijuana the next most frequently used (22 percent). In contrast, the reported use of "hard" drugs such as crack (1.1 percent), regular ("powdered") cocaine (1.5 percent), or heroin (1.5 percent) was quite rare. Polydrug use was infrequent also, with just one percent of the sample reporting that they had tried three or more of the drugs on our list.

The findings displayed in Table 8 suggest a link between drug use and gun possession. Those respondents who reported using no drugs showed a relatively low level of possession (five percent). Those reporting use of any drug also reported a level of gun possession (14 percent) nearly triple that of those females who indicated that they abstained from drug use. However, there is considerable variation in the relationship between type of drug and gun possession. As the figures in Table 8 indicate, percentages of the sample who reported having a gun began to rise slightly with the use of alcohol (nine percent), then took a rather pronounced leap to 21 percent among reported marijuana users. Although their numbers were quite small (N = 14), more than half of the those who reported using hard drugs also reported possessing a firearm.

Table 8 about here

A virtually identical pattern is evident for carrying a gun "at least now and then." As can be seen in Table 8, gun carrying is a relatively rare behavior among those who use no drugs (five percent). However, as the sample is categorized according to involvement in different forms of drug use, gun carrying increases in concert with gun possession. The exception pertains to the use of hard drugs only, though the sample loss associated with this specific type of drug use renders any results unreliable. Overall, though, a clear pattern of reported drug use associated with the possession and carrying of firearms is found among this sample of female high school students.

We do not interpret these results necessarily to imply that drug use is the cause of the students' firearm-related activity. Yet, we recognize that an absence of drug use, especially beyond alcohol, may be indicative of lifestyle choices (e.g., avoidance of risk-related behavior) that simultaneously contribute to an avoidance of illegal drugs and the possession of guns. Conversely, the use of drugs (and, most definitely, hard drugs) may tend to place one in environments where the presence of guns is common, a factor potentially influencing both the motivation and opportunity to obtain a firearm.

The notion of a lifestyle factor contributing to a guns-drugs linkage was supported when we examined levels of gun possession among those who said they engaged in drug sales, a group we would expect to display particularly high levels of gun possession. Responding to the item concerning their involvement in drug trafficking, nine percent (N = 658) of the sample admitted to some level of involvement in drug sales. Further analysis found this segment to report substantially higher levels of gun possession than those who claimed not to have engaged in this practice (26 percent versus nine percent, a

statistically significant difference) as well as gun carrying (24 percent versus seven percent, also a statistically significant difference). Clearly, an association with drugs seemed to be an important correlate of the decision among our sample to possess or carry some type of firearm.

Guns and Gangs

In exploring the relationship of gang membership to gun possession, we determined gang membership on the basis of responses to the item "Do you consider yourself to be the member of a gang?" However, recognizing the potentially varied interpretations of the term "gang," we followed that inquiry with a series of other questions to ascertain more specifically the characteristics of the group with whom the respondent claimed to be affiliated. Those questions included the size of the group and whether the group had a specific name, a designated leader, regular meetings, distinct clothing, and a perceived turf to be defended. Using this information, we were able to identify three types of gangs: (1) Quasi-gang: a group with whom the respondent identified but did not define as an organized gang; (2) Unstructured gang: a group considered by the respondent to be organized but that had fewer than 10 members and few of the trappings normally associated with organized gangs; and (3) Structured gang: a group considered by the respondent to be organized and, according to the respondent's description, had at least 10 members and most of the characteristics normally associated with organized gangs found in large cities (see Sheley et al. 1993 for details of this typology).

As shown in Table 9, a general relationship between gang membership and gun possession is quite apparent. When comparisons are made between those belonging to gangs and those who do not, a significant difference in the

proportion of gun ownership is evident, with self-identified gang members (regardless of type) being nearly twice as likely as non-gang members to report possession of firearms. In looking at specific types of gangs, however, it becomes clear that the overall association is accounted for largely because of the particularly high rate of possession among structured gang members. While their actual numbers are relatively low (only 19 females met the criteria for structured gang membership), more than half of these females reported owning guns.

Table 9 about here

A similar pattern is found for gun carrying. However, in the case of females in gangs, membership appears to enhance the probability of their carrying a firearm even over that of possessing one. As shown in Table 9, gun carrying is over three times more likely among women reporting gang membership versus those who do not. We speculate that many women in gangs, while not actually owning a firearm, are presented with weapons for carrying (or perhaps more specifically, holding) purposes in some gang-related activities. Whatever the reason, the results strongly suggest that both gun possession and gun carrying are behaviors that are relatively common among the gang-affiliated females in our sample. However, we temper these conclusions with the recognition that the role of females in urban gangs tends to be substantially different from that of male gang members, and that females are often only indirect participants in gang-related illegal activities (for discussions of female participation in gangs, see Campbell [1990] and Moore [1991]). Consequently, we suspect that to the extent that a gang-guns

relationship exists among females in our sample, it emerges more as a matter of association and opportunity rather than as a reflection of participation in overt gang activity, particularly in its most violent forms.

DISCUSSION

In summarizing the results of this report, we note several major findings:

(1) Gun possession and carrying seemed prevalent in the immediate social environment of our respondents. Many of their friends and family members, most especially males, carried guns. A substantial portion of the sample believed that guns were carried, at least occasionally, to school by other students. Further, a large portion of the sample knew of other students who had been shot at. Given these perceptions, it is not surprising that the respondents assumed also that guns were readily available in their neighborhoods.

(2) Roughly one in eight of our respondents reported having possessed a gun at sometime, most likely a handgun. However, a substantially smaller proportion reported that they carried guns, with gun carrying at school being particularly infrequent. In all cases, their levels of possession and carrying of firearms were substantially lower than those reported by a similar sample of male respondents.

(3) Among those females who carried guns, the preference was for relatively standard types of firearms, primarily revolvers.

(4) The respondents who possessed guns reported that, in the main, they did so for self protection.

(5) The majority of the sample assumed that acquiring a gun would pose few problems. Should they desire to obtain a firearm, the respondents

indicated that borrowing or buying one from family and friends would be their most likely source.

(6) Gun possession was not necessarily randomly distributed throughout our sample. In particular, those female respondents involved in the use of illegal drugs or professing membership in gangs (especially as that term is most commonly understood) were considerably more likely than their counterparts to possess a firearm. Recalling that "self protection" was listed as a primary motive for gun possession, we speculate that involvement in these activities in and of themselves may increase a female adolescent's perception of the need to arm herself and of opportunities to acquire firearms.

The prevalence of gun possession among the females in our sample is higher than might be expected among a more diverse sample of high-school females; in fact, their level of possession may well exceed that of a sample of males from a different social-structural environment. However, these same females appear to be only marginal participants in the some of the more egregious forms of behavior associated with the male counterparts inhabiting their social world (e.g., the carrying of guns to school or a well-defined guns/drugs/gangs association). Noting this discrepancy, our findings suggest as a general policy implication that efforts to reduce gun possession -- and more specifically, gun use -- will be most successful if they are targeted predominantly toward males. This is not to say that the gun possession reported here by females is necessarily inconsequential. Instead, based on our results, we merely recognize that the bulk of gun carrying and use is by males, and attempts to develop ameliorative programs must be cognizant of the specific context in which much of the violence associated with firearms

occurs.

This said, we do note a disturbing pattern of gun acquisition reported by our sample. The most common supplier of guns was a friend or family member. Given a related finding, we suspect that in many cases the transfer of a firearm to a minor is justified in terms of "self protection." However, recognizing that guns carried for defensive purposes are often used by youths in situations more suggestive of offense, to supply a youth with arms is to increase the risk of a violent, and potentially lethal, encounter. It is clear, therefore, that any meaningful reduction in gun carrying among the inner-city youth of our sample must be accomplished partially by a greater reluctance among those close to these youths to provide them with firearms. At present, there appears to be little to dissuade people from engaging in such a transfer.

A potentially more effective means of reducing gun-related violence rests with an alteration of the perception of a need for firearms in the day-to-day activities of inner-city youth. Quite bluntly, the perceived need for self protection among many of the youths in our sample is a wholly logical response to the immediate environment in which they are forced to exist.¹⁶ As long as that very real danger exists, many youths will carry guns. Ultimately, providing inner-city residents with a perceptibly safer environment in which to live will require a host of coordinated efforts among a variety of social institutions.

¹⁶As sobering evidence of this, there have been students shot on the grounds of four schools in our sample since the conclusion of our research.

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Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Female High School Student Sample (Ns in parentheses)

Characteristic	%
Age	(829)
14	7
15	27
16	31
17	22
18+	13
Race	(829)
white	2
black	78
hispanic	13
asian	4
other	3
Grade Level	(825)
ninth	25
tenth	33
eleventh	23
twelfth	19

Table 2. Female Students' Exposure to Firearms

Items	%	(N)
<u>Guns Among Family and Friends</u>		
About how many [males in your family] would you say owned a gun?		(790)
None	32	
Some of them	38	
Most of them	20	
All of them	10	
And about how many of them make it a habit of carrying guns outside their homes?		(790)
None	58	
Some of them	28	
Most of them	9	
All of them	5	
About how many of [the people you hang around with] would you say <u>own</u> a gun?		(784)
None	67	
Some of them	24	
Most of them	7	
All of them	2	
And about how many of them would you say make a habit of carrying guns outside the home?		
None	72	
Some of them	19	
Most of them	7	
All of them	2	
Not including yourself, do you personally know anyone who has carried a gun with them to this school in the past year?		(804)
No	55	
Yes, just one	18	
Yes, a few	21	
Yes, many	6	

Table 2 - continued

Exposure to Firearm Violence

How often have the following things happened to you while you were in school or on your way to and from school in the last few years:

Been threatened with a gun		(733)
Never	87	
Once	8	
A few times	4	
Many times	1	

Been shot at with a gun		(733)
Never	94	
Once	4	
A few times	1	
Many times	1	

How about the other kids that you know personally in your school -- have any of them had any of these experiences in the last few years:

Been threatened with a gun		(719)
No, none	57	
Yes, one or two	24	
Yes, a few	13	
Yes, many	6	

Been shot at with a gun		(714)
No, none	55	
Yes, one or two	20	
Yes, a few	14	
Yes, many	10	

Access to Guns

How much trouble do you think it would be for you to get the gun you wanted?		(727)
No trouble at all	30	
Only a little trouble	18	
A lot of trouble, but it could be done	21	
Almost impossible	31	

Table 3. Respondents' Gun Ownership

Item	%	(N)
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For every weapon on the list, please indicate where you personally have EVER owned such a weapon, or had such a weapon that you considered yours even if you did not actually own it?

Any type of firearm	12	(815)
Hunting Rifle	3	(824)
Regular Shotgun	7	(823)
Military-style rifle	3	(822)
Revolver	9	(819)
Automatic or Semi-Automatic Handgun	5	(819)
Sawed-Off Shotgun	3	(823)
Derringer	4	(822)
Zip Gun	3	(821)

Which of the following KINDS of guns do you own or possess AT THIS TIME?

Hunting Rifle	2	(814)
Regular Shotgun	4	(812)
Military-style rifle	1	(814)
Revolver	6	(813)
Automatic or Semi-Automatic Handgun	4	(813)
Sawed-Off Shotgun	2	(814)
Derringer	2	(814)
Zip Gun	1	(814)

Table 4. Gun Carrying Among Respondents

Item	%	(N)
About how often would you say you carry a gun with you when you are outside your home but not at school, including in your car?		(762)
All the Time	1	
Most of the Time	2	
Only Now and Then	8	
Never	89	
And about how often would you say you carry a gun with you when you are at school?		(775)
All the Time	<1	
Most of the Time	1	
Only Now and Then	2	
Never	97	

Table 5. Importance of Reasons for Obtaining Most Recent Handgun*

Reason	N	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
To protect myself	(71)	89	10	1
All my enemies were carrying guns	(56)	27	25	48
Needed a gun to get somebody	(56)	9	18	73
To impress people	(56)	7	2	91
All my friends were carrying guns	(56)	4	13	83
To sell	(54)	2	7	91

*Responses to item: "Look over the list below and circle [the response] which comes closest to saying how important that reason was to you when you obtained your most recent handgun." Responses reported are for those who claim to have obtained a handgun.

Table 6. Respondents' Sources of Firearm Acquisition*

Source	%	(N)
Borrow one from family member or friend	51	(727)
Buy one from family member or friend	31	(727)
Buy one from gun shop	34	(727)
Get one off the street	25	(727)
Get one from a drug dealer	17	(727)
Get one from a junkie	12	(726)
Steal from a house or apartment	4	(727)
Steal from a person or car	3	(727)
Steal from a store or pawnshop	2	(724)

*In response to question: "Check the ways you think you might go about getting a gun if you decided you wanted one. Check as many answers as apply."

Table 7. Reported Means of Actually Obtaining a Handgun*

Source	% (N = 74)
From a friend	41
From a member of my family	30
From a gun shop	9
Off the street	8
From a drug dealer or junkie	8
All other	4

*In response to question: "Please circle below the [means] that best says where you got your most recent HANDGUN."

Table 8. Gun Possession and Gun Carrying by Type of Drug Use

Type of Drug Used	N	% Reporting Gun Possession	N	% Reporting Gun Carrying
No drug use	275	5	260	5
1 or more drugs used	416	14*	402	12*
Alcohol only	269	9*	253	6
Marijuana only	133	21*	128	19*
Hard drugs only [#]	14	57*	2	0

[#]Crack cocaine, cocaine, or heroin

*Different from "No drug use", $p < .05$

Table 9. Gun Possession and Gun Carrying by Gang Membership

Type of Gang	N	% Reporting Gun Possession	N	% Reporting Gun Carrying
None	647	10	611	8
All types	129	20*	123	26*
Quasi	99	13	93	18
Unstructured	11	18	11	36
Structured	19	58*	19	58*

*Different from "None", $p < .05$