



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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Arrestees and Guns: Monitoring the Illegal Firearms Market

Firearms are plentiful, easily obtained, and regularly used by offenders in major urban areas, according to interim findings from a study conducted for the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). Thirty-nine percent of arrestees reported ever owning a firearm—a rate higher than the general population's self-reported ownership rates and lower than rates for more serious offenders. Most troubling is that 40 percent of juvenile males—for whom the possession of most firearms is by statute illegal—reported ever possessing a firearm. Just over a third of the juveniles admitted to owning a firearm in the previous 30 days.

The findings are based on data collected by researchers in interviews with more than 4,000 recent arrestees in 11 cities (Atlanta, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Miami, Phoenix, San Diego, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C.) during the first 3 months of 1995. These cities were chosen because they participated in NIJ's Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program and have high crime rates. Most provide data on juveniles as well as adults. The DUF program, on a quarterly basis, conducts urinalysis tests and interviews with recent arrestees. Six of the cities—Atlanta, Detroit, New Orleans, Miami, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C.—were among the U.S. cities with the highest levels of violent crime in 1993.

Interim findings

The wide availability of firearms and the increase in firearm violence among young people provided the impetus for this study. The ongoing study is focused on learning how offenders obtain firearms, their motives in obtaining them, their patterns of firearm use, and their experiences as victims of firearms. Interim findings are based on interviews with 2,343 adult males, 942 adult females, 753 juvenile males, and 103 juvenile females. Overall, admitted gang membership and involvement in

drug sales appear to be most associated with gun ownership. Highlights of the findings to date include:

- Fifteen percent of the total sample of arrestees reported that they carried a gun all or most of the time. (Among juvenile male arrestees, 22 percent reported carrying a gun all or most of the time.) For arrestees who admitted selling illegal drugs in the past year, this figure jumps to 25 percent, and for those who admit gang membership, it jumps to 36 percent.
- Interestingly, those who tested positive (via urinalysis) for illegal drugs were no more likely to report possession or use of a firearm than those whose test results were negative.
- As might be expected, the illegal firearms market has played a large role in providing arrestees with access to weapons; 45 percent of those interviewed said this was how they obtained their guns.
- A strong association was found between carrying a gun and gang membership and carrying a gun and illicit drug-selling. Of the total sample, 7 percent reported that they were current members of a gang, and 19 percent reported having sold drugs within the past year. Among those reporting gang membership, 36 percent stated that they carried a gun all or most of the time. Among respondents reporting drug sales in the previous year, 25 percent indicated that they carried a gun all or most of the time.
- A similar association was found between illegal gun procurement and gang membership or illicit drug sales. Sixty percent of those who admitted to gang membership reported having obtained their most recently acquired gun through illegal means, and 60 percent of those who reported having sold illegal drugs in the last year made a similar claim.

■ The majority of the sample (55 percent) reported that it was easy to get firearms illegally, and one-third of the sample (34 percent) said they could get a gun in less than a week.

■ Twenty-four percent of the arrestees interviewed admitted using a gun in a crime (32 percent of the juvenile males), and one-third of that group said they fired the gun during the crime. Considerably higher figures were reported for gang members and those who sold illegal drugs in the preceding year.

■ Thirteen percent of interviewed offenders indicated that they had stolen a gun.

■ Arrestees have experienced high levels of firearm victimization. Fifty-six percent had been threatened with a gun (60 percent among adult male arrestees and 55 percent among juvenile male arrestees), 42 percent had been shot at (48 percent among adult male arrestees and 50 percent among juvenile male arrestees), and 16 percent had been injured by gunshot (21 percent among adult male arrestees and 11 percent among juvenile male arrestees). Exposure to violence through victimization was associated with the likelihood of owning or possessing firearms. That is, arrestees who reported being threatened or shot at were more likely to admit gun ownership than those who had not been victimized.

■ Arrestees' beliefs about firearm use suggest a series of norms that support and encourage the use of firearms to settle disputes. For example, 9 percent agreed with the statement, "It is OK to shoot someone who has disrespected you," and 28 percent agreed that "It is OK to shoot someone who hurt you." Among juvenile males, 38 percent held this view.

Additional data for this project will be collected through summer 1995, and a final report on the project is expected to be available in late fall.

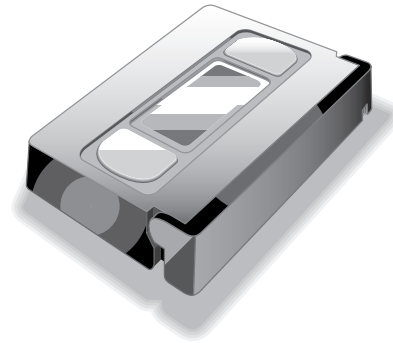
This study is being conducted under NIJ grant 95-IJ-R014 by Scott Decker, Ph.D., Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Susan Pennell, Criminal Justice Research Division, San Diego Association of Governments. For further information on the project, please contact Dr. Thomas Feucht, Program Manager, Office of Research and Evaluation, NIJ, at 202-307-2949. Inquiries may also be made to Dr. Decker at 314-516-5038 or Ms. Pennell at 619-595-5383.

As part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series, Dr. Decker and Ms. Pennell discussed this study with an audience of researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape *Monitoring the Illegal Firearms Market* is available for \$19.00 (\$24.00 in Canada and other countries). Please ask for NCJ 153850.

Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape and any of the 11 other tapes now available in the series.

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NCJ 152235—Alfred Blumstein, Ph.D., J. Erik Jonsson University Professor of Urban Systems and Operations Research, H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy Management, Carnegie Mellon University: *Youth Violence, Guns, and Illicit Drug Markets*.

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