

Criminals acquire guns through social connections

September 16 2015

Criminals are far more likely to acquire guns from family and acquaintances than by theft, according to new studies by researchers at Duke University and the University of Chicago.

"There are a number of myths about how criminals get their [guns](#), such as most of them are stolen or come from dirty dealers. We didn't find that to be the case," said Philip J. Cook, a professor of [public policy](#), economics and sociology at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy.

One study asked inmates of the Cook County Jail in Chicago how they obtained guns, while a second project analyzed data that traced guns used in crimes. The gun trace requests were submitted to the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) by the Chicago Police Department from 2009 to 2013.

Key findings from the studies include:

- 60 percent of the respondents obtained guns by purchase or trade.
- Most offenders obtained guns from personal connections, not from gun stores or by theft.
- Most of the guns were old (11 years old on average), and criminals held onto the guns a short time, frequently less than a year.
- Chicago gangs sometimes organize gun buys and distribute guns

to members.

- The Chicago Police Department's enforcement efforts had an influence on the underground gun market. Respondents were concerned with the higher risk of arrest when dealing with a stranger and about being caught with a "dirty" gun that had been fired in a previous crime.

In 2013, for the Cook County Jail Pilot Survey, researchers interviewed 99 inmates with a record of violence and gang involvement about their gun purchases. Chicago gun laws prohibit selling guns to people with criminal records, or those under 21 years old.

The study, "Sources of Guns to Dangerous People: What we Learn by Asking Them," was published online by the journal *Preventive Medicine* and will appear in print next month in a special issue, "The Epidemiology and Prevention of Gun Violence." The research was supported by the Joyce Foundation.

"One survey respondent gave what amounted to a lecture on how guns enter the neighborhood," said Cook.

That respondent said, "As far as Chicago, it's so close to Indiana ... there's gun laws, but it's easier to get access to guns in Indiana so most people either go to the down-South states or go to Indiana to get guns or people obtain gun licenses, go to the store and then resell."

Information from the Cook County inmates lined up with findings in a second study, which identified straw purchasers and gun traffickers as key sources of crime guns in Chicago. Straw purchasers can pass a background check and buy guns that they transfer to others.

This study, "Some Sources of Crime Guns in Chicago: Dirty dealers, straw purchases and traffickers," is forthcoming in the 2015 *Journal of*

Criminal Law and Criminology. The research was supported by operating grants to the University of Chicago from the MacArthur and McCormick foundations, as well as project grants from the Joyce and McCormick foundations and the Fund for a Safer Future.

By linking ATF information that traced guns to crimes with information from the Chicago Police Department about the person caught with the gun, the researchers could identify which of them were gang members and compare their guns with those possessed by non-gang members.

"Dirty dealers," who deliberately violate the law and sell to buyers who cannot pass a background check, accounted for less than 5 percent of the guns sold to gang members.

More than 60 percent of the crime guns were initially purchased out of state. Meanwhile, 15 percent of new crime guns confiscated from a man were first purchased by a woman, which suggests a straw purchase.

The findings suggest that targeting by law enforcement of the intermediaries in the underground market, the straw purchasers and the traffickers helps reduce access to guns by some dangerous people, Cook said.

"This research demonstrates that current federal and local regulations are having a big effect on the availability of guns to criminals in Chicago," he said. "They can't buy their guns from stores, the way most people do, and are instead largely constrained to making private deals with acquaintances, who may or may not be willing and able to provide what they want.

"Other studies we have done have found that in many cases criminals go without guns because they don't know how to get one. We conclude that

current enforcement is somewhat effective, and devoting more resources to enforcement would further constrain gun access by dangerous people."

More information: "Sources of Guns to Dangerous People: What we Learn by Asking Them," Philip J. Cook, Susan T. Parker and Harold A. Pollack. *Preventive Medicine* 79 (2015): 28-36. Special issue on *The Epidemiology and Prevention of Gun Violence*.
doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.04.021

Provided by Duke University

Citation: Criminals acquire guns through social connections (2015, September 16) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-09-criminals-guns-social.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--