

Vast majority of guns recovered by Pittsburgh police not in possession of legal owners

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Nearly 80 percent of perpetrators carrying a gun recovered by Pittsburgh Police were not the lawful owners, a strong indication that theft and trafficking are significant sources of firearms involved in crimes in southwest Pennsylvania, a new University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health analysis reveals.

The finding suggests a timely opportunity for collaboration between [public health](#) and [law enforcement officials](#) to better understand and reduce violent crimes involving firearms. The results are published in the journal *Social Medicine* and funded by the former Falk Foundation.

"Homicide by firearms continues to rank among the leading causes of death for young people in the U.S.," said lead author Anthony Fabio, Ph.D., M.P.H., assistant professor of epidemiology at Pitt Public Health. "Given the pandemic threat in the United States of firearm violence, immediate improvement in firearm surveillance is needed to save lives. It is estimated that there are more than 300 million guns in the U.S. And we know that firearm production is increasing. In 2013, nearly 11 million firearms were manufactured in the U.S., more than double the number produced in 2008."

Dr. Fabio and his team analyzed 762 cases in which a gun was recovered by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police Firearm Tracking Unit in 2008.

In 44.3 percent of the cases where the perpetrator was not the owner of the firearm, the [police](#) could not get in contact with the owner to find out how they lost possession of it. In cases where police made contact with the original owner, more than 30 percent said they were stolen, but only 57.9 percent of those had officially reported the theft prior to recovery by police.

Firearms reported stolen before recovery by police were owned by women 16.6 percent of the time. However, that number climbs to 19.3 percent for firearms reported stolen only after recovery by police.

"Owners who have illegally transferred their firearm, perhaps as a straw purchase where they buy the gun for someone who otherwise would not be able to legally obtain one, may be more likely to resist attempts by police to contact them or claim the firearm was stolen after police contact them," said Dr. Fabio. "The disparity we found in firearms reported stolen by women may be due to girlfriends and spouses making straw purchases for their male partners. But the overriding issue here is that these numbers are just estimates. Even police departments do not have the resources to accurately and consistently track firearms used in illegal activities."

Dr. Fabio and his co-authors recommend that more efforts be made to educate the public about safe storage of firearms and injury prevention, as well as encourage ongoing, systemic collaboration between public health and [law enforcement](#) experts to better understand and reduce violent crime and improve access to data collection on firearms.

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

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