

Weapons trade reveals a darker side to dark web

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Thomas Holt, professor in the School of Criminal Justice, focuses his research on computer hacking, malware and the role of the internet in facilitating all manner of crime and deviance. Credit: Michigan State University

Debates over gun regulations make headlines across the world, but there's an underground operation for weapons that has drawn very little

attention – until now. Researchers from Michigan State University crept into the dark web to investigate how firearms are anonymously bought and sold around the world.

"We know so little about the distribution of firearms sold on the [dark web](#) that it's kind of a black hole, similar to illicit pharmaceuticals and narcotics: We know people buy them online, but we don't know to what extent," said Thomas Holt, MSU professor of criminal justice and co-author. "The more we understand how guns move, how they are sold and what types of guns are available on the dark web, the more we'll understand how the internet can serve as a [niche market](#) for gun distribution."

The research, published in *Deviant Behavior*, revealed key insights on a trade that undercuts gun laws in the United States, as well as other countries around the world where regulations are tighter.

"What I found most surprising was that most of what we saw wasn't rifles of military-grade weapons," Holt said. "Instead of exotic or rare firearms, we saw handguns – the kinds of weapons someone in the U.S. could buy from stores or vendors with a license. Additionally, the price points of these guns weren't drastically different than what you'd find if you were buying legally. These observations beg the question, 'why the dark web instead?'"

Sixty-four percent of the products advertised were handguns, 17% were semi-automatic long guns and fully automatic long guns were 4%.

There are many reasons buyers could turn to the dark web to purchase a weapon, Holt explained. One example would be a buyer who can't legally obtain a firearm; another explanation would be that the buyer lives in a country with stricter gun laws. Regardless, Holt said that because the dark web allows for total anonymity, it supports his theory that the dark

web buyers are those who wouldn't be able to purchase a firearm legally.

Holt and partners dug into shops, or single-owner websites hosted on Tor, a dark web browser, using a scraping tool to track vendors anonymously selling firearms, as well as to identify patterns of their operations. Common threads between the sellers included: vendors deliberately selling hand and long guns; the use of bitcoin for payment; sellers' shops requesting PO Boxes to ship the product; and how sellers delivered the guns.

From these consistencies, collected between February 2016 and May 2016, Holt was able to draw conclusions – as well as ask more pointed questions for follow-up research.

"The sellers were very clear about how the transaction would go, which underscored the need for consistent secrecy. Some profile names indicated that they operated out of Europe, but there's little else to tell about who these people are," Holt said. "The sellers would oftentimes say they'd ship the product in separate pieces and hide them in books, shoes, cocoa, computer parts and other innocuous things, as well as to be alerted if a part was held up in customs."

While the dark web masks a user's identity, location and any traces of persona, Holt's findings reveal the need for further investigations, and potential growth and impact.

"We shouldn't take these markets as trivial because they could grow, travel and change very quickly. It takes just one gun purchased through the dark web to kill someone and the danger is very real," Holt said.

"While technology doesn't allow us as researchers to know who these sellers and buyers are, we can confirm that the transactions are very real, that they're international in scope, and that the buyers could be violating major government regulations and guidelines. This market could cater to

major violence and the danger is we don't know to what extent."

More information: Christopher Copeland et al. Assessing the Practices and Products of Darkweb Firearm Vendors, *Deviant Behavior* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2019.1596465](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2019.1596465)

Provided by Michigan State University

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