**U.S. Department of Justice**
National Institute of Justice

# The Armed Criminal in America

## A Survey of Incarcerated Felons

by

**James D. Wright**

*Principal Investigator*

**Peter H. Rossi**

*Co-Principal Investigator*

July 1985

**National Institute of Justice**

James K. Stewart
*Director*

Lois Felson Mock
*Project Monitor*

This project was supported by Grant Number 82–IJ–CX–0001, awarded to the Social and Demographic Research Institute, University of Massachusetts, by the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, as amended. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

# Contents

# List of Tables

# Acknowledgements

A research project such as the one reported here only succeeds if it enjoys the cooperation and assistance of any number of people who, through obligation or courtesy, make themselves and their expertise available to the research staff. Whether this project has in fact succeeded is for readers, not us, to decide; such failings as it may contain, however, are not for lack of the enthusiastic cooperation and capable assistance of the following individuals, for whose contributions we are most grateful:

Our first and largest debt is to the National Institute of Justice, who provided the funds to undertake this research and who has supported the Social and Demographic Research Institute's violent crime research program for the past seven years. Officials at NIJ who have been involved in varying degrees with the project include the Institute Director, James K. Stewart, and the Associate Director, Robert Burkhart; Fred Heinzelmann, Director of the Institute's Community Crime Prevention Division; and Dr. Lois Mock, who served as project monitor for the study.

We note a special gratitude to Dr. Mock for her patience in seeing the project through to completion, her assistance in winning the initial grant, her many valuable suggestions as the research proceeded, and her detailed and helpful comments on earlier drafts.

We are also grateful for the time and advice of the scholars and practitioners who constituted the project's Advisory Committee: Mr. Al Andrews, Chief of Police of Peoria, Illinois; Dr. Marcia Chaiken of the National Institute for Sentencing Alternatives; Dr. Phillip Cook of Duke University; Dr. Mark Moore of Harvard University; and Mr. William Wilkie of the National Institute of Corrections. The members of the Advisory Committee met formally to review the project pretest results and to brainstorm over the contents of the questionnaire; most of them were also pestered by mail or phone periodically throughout the study for advice and counsel.

Mr. Wilkie is owed a special note of thanks for his assistance in arranging our access to the state prison systems where we eventually interviewed. A day on the phone in behalf of a research project not of his own making saved us what would have otherwise been several months of work.

The project was also blessed with an extraordinarily resourceful and talented field team who travelled to prisons all over the United States gathering the data on which this study is based. For services dramatically in excess of the rate of pay--for countless hours in coach class, endless nights in Holiday Inns, fifteen and sixteen hour working days, and infinite patience (and good research judgment) in the face of wary administrators and hostile inmates--we thank Jeff Segal, Joe Pereira, and Tommy Joyner.

Additional thanks are owed Mr. Pereira for having undertaken the data quality analysis reported in the text and for assisting in the translation of the Spanish version of the questionnaire; and also to Mr. Segal, who undertook the data analyses and first drafts of the material on stolen firearms.

Data entry, analysis, and management were under the general direction of SADRI's Director of Software Development and Data Base Management, Ms. Eleanor Weber-Burdin, whose talents on the computer are exceeded only by her commitment to the people and projects of "the shop." Ms. Weber-Burdin's assistant, Ms. Marianne Geronimo, provided supervision of the data entry staff and much assistance to the principal investigators in the data analysis. Special thanks to both of them for yet another job well done.

Gratitude is also owed the several undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Massachusetts who entered the data from the raw questionnaires onto the computer at a quick rate and with remarkably few errors: Rachael Angeline, Matthew Archibald, Denise Furlong, Michael Hanrahan, Amy Kopel, Lisa Lorant, Mary Ellen Madaio, and Aida Rodriguez. Ms. Rodriguez also assisted in preparing the Spanish version of the questionnaire.

Our presence in the ten research sites, and therefore our ability to gather the project data, was only possible because of the cooperation and assistance of each state's corrections administration--from the State Commissioner of Corrections down to and including the security staff who were assigned to watch over the field team while we were in the site. None of the following people had any obligation to render, or stood to profit from, the help which was, nonetheless, freely given:

In Michigan: Mr. Perry M. Johnson, Director, Michigan Department of Corrections; Mr. William Kime, Deputy Director of Research; Mr. Robert Richardson, Chief of Research in the Program Bureau; Warden John Jabe and Deputy Warden Gach, Michigan Reformatory; Mr. Jabe's Administrative Assistant, Mr. Joe Cross; Mr. Robert Heriford; and Officers Bernard Clark, Richard Signs, Don Gostenell, and Bradley Harris.

In Missouri: Dr. Lee Roy Black, Director, Department of Corrections and Human Resources; Mr. Dale Riley, Acting Director, Division of Adult Institutions; Mr. Gerard Frey, Superintendent, and Mr. Don Cabana, Assistant Superintendent, Missouri Eastern Correctional Center; and at the Center, Ms. Micki Andrews.

In Minnesota: Mr. Jack G. Young, Commissioner, Mr. Orville Pung, Deputy Commissioner, and Mr. Gerry Strathman, Research Director, Minnesota Department of Corrections; Mr. Frank Wood, Superintendent, and Mr. Dennis Benson, Residential Program Manager, Minnesota Corrections Facility at Oak Park Heights; at the Oak Park Heights facility, Lt. Lou Stender, Mr. David Crist, and Mr. Rick Hillengass; Mr. James Hulburt, Superintendent, Minnesota Corrections Facility at Lino Lake; and at the Lino Lakes facility, Mr. William McGrath, Ms. Delores Redfield, Ms. Toby Larson, and Officer Pat Clemens.

In Oklahoma: Mr. Larry R. Meachum, Director, and Mr. Clifton Sandel, Supervisor of Planning and Research, Oklahoma Department of Corrections; Mr. Larry Fields, Warden, Joe Harp Correctional Center; and at the Center, Mr. Larry Thornton, Medical Director; Mr. Sam Preston, Programs Director; and Officers Stephen D. Moore, Terry W. Ragsdale, Jerome L. Carson, Keith Hall, and John Y. Brown.

In Florida: Mr. Louis L. Wainwright, Secretary, Dr. John H. Dale, Jr., Chief, Bureau of Planning, Research, and Statistics, and Mr. Bob Kriegner, Florida Department of Corrections; Superintendent Raymond D. Massey and Mr. Paul V. Gunning, Assistant Superintendent for Operations, Union Correctional Institution; and at the Institution, Colonel Jackson, Major Tomlinson, Lieutenant Rayburn, and Sergeant Newman of the Security Staff; Mr. Cunningham, Chief of Classification; Mr. J. L. Pitcher, Business Manager; Mr. Chuck Davis, Director of the educational unit; and Officer Robbie Watson.

In Georgia: Mr. David C. Evans, Commissioner, Mr. Ben Wyckoff, Director of Research and Evaluation, and Ms. Meg Updycke, Office of Public Affairs, Georgia Department of Corrections; Mr. Bob Francis, Warden, Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Center; and at the Center, Mr. Parrish, Assistant Superintendent for Security, Mr. David Fields, Assistant Superintendent for Operations, and Mr. Steve Phillips, Assistant Superintendent for Care and Treatment; Mr. Dave Cawthon; and Officers Wesley Baker and Tommy Lee Williamson.

In Nevada: Mr. Vernon Housewright, Director, Nevada Department of Prisons; Mr. George Sumner, Superintendent, Nevada State Prison; and at the Prison, Counsellor Robin Bates and Lt. Roger Belleville.

In Arizona: Mr. Ellis MacDougall, Director, Mr. Jerry Thompson, Deputy Director, and Mr. Bob Anderson, Head of Research, Arizona Department of Corrections; Mr. Don Wawrzaszek, Chief Administrator, Arizona State Prison; Mr. Bob Goldsmith, Warden, and Mr. Al Grijalva, Assistant Warden, Central Unit; and at the Unit, Major Herndon, Chief of Security, and Officers Becky Blanco, Myron B. Fristad, Gary E. Peterson, Rickey Garrett, and John A. Nielson.

In Maryland: Mr. John P. Galley, Commissioner, and Mr. Bruce Stout, Executive Assistant, Maryland Division of Correction; Mr. Marlin Bachtell, Warden, Maryland Correctional Training Center; and at the Center, Mr. Terrie Chavis, Assistant Superintendent for Treatment, and his assistant, Mr. Bernard Burnes; Mr. Brewer, Security Officer; Lt. Nelson Baker; and Officers John Mills, Charles Turner, and Daniel Sirbaugh.

In Massachusetts: Mr. Michael V. Fair, Commissioner, Mr. Dennis Humphrey, Associate Commissioner, and Mr. Frank Carney, Director of Research, Massachusetts Department of Correction; Superintendent Terence Holbrook and Deputy Superintendent Michael Maloney, Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk; and at the Institution, Mr. Carlos Geromini, Principal of the Education Unit, and Officer James Butler.

The next-to-final draft of the survey questionnaire was pretested on 18 men serving sentences in the Berkshire County House of Corrections, a county jail in Western Massachusetts. We are grateful to Sheriff Carmen C. Massimiano and Officer Paul Therrien of the Pittsfield Police Department for arranging our access to the pretest site.

Over the course of this project, SADRI was well-served by an able and cheerful secretarial pool consisting at various times of Ms. Cindy Coffman, Mr. Ken Forfia, Ms. Jeanne Reinle, Ms. Kathy Moore, and Ms. Jane Karp, all of whom contributed to the production of this manuscript or to one (or more) of its several predecessors.

Previous drafts of the study report (or its component parts) profitted immensely from the careful reading and critical commentary of Dr. Lois Mock, Dr. Phillip Cook, Dr. Paul Blackman, Mr. Mark Benenson, Dr. Gary Kleck, Dr. Marcia Chaiken, several of our colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, numerous participants at various meetings and symposia where preliminary findings were presented, and others who have asked not to be identified. We are grateful indeed to these people for having prevented many factual errors and interpretive excesses from seeing the light of print.

Finally, we express our gratitude to the nearly 2,000 prisoners all over the United States who agreed to participate in this study and complete a survey questionnaire.

Despite the considerable assistance just acknowledged, none of the persons and institutions identified above, nor the National Institute of Justice, nor the United States government, bears any responsibility whatsoever for any of the findings, interpretations, conclusions, or implications expressed in this volume, all of which remain our own.

James D. Wright and Peter H. Rossi
Amherst, Massachusetts
November, 1984

# Background and Methodology

## Introduction

Violent crime that threatens or abuses the physical safety of its victims lies at the heart of the crime problem in America today. In turn, the use of firearms to commit crime constitutes a major portion of the violent crime problem. Each year, some 30,000 American citizens die through the suicidal, homicidal, or accidental abuse of guns; several hundreds of thousands are injured; hundreds of thousands more are victimized by gun crime (Wright et al., 1983).

Crime of all sorts impacts on a substantial portion of the nation's households: victimization surveys show that one out of five households is victimized by crime annually. Although violent crime per se constitutes no more than about a tenth of all crime, the remainder being economic crime, it contributes considerably more than its share to the fear of crime and to the public's sense of crime as a serious problem facing the Nation. Indeed, it can be argued that violent crime is the crime problem and that a reduction in violent crime should be a matter of highest priority on the law enforcement and criminal justice policy agendas of our society.

The research reported here was designed to make a contribution to the formation of policy in this area by providing basic information on violent crime and, in particular, on violent criminals. To this end, we have attempted to provide answers to two basic questions:

First, what roles do firearms play in the lives of violent criminals? What motivates them to acquire, carry, and use guns? And secondly, how do criminals obtain the firearms that they use to commit their crimes?

This report presents our research findings relating to these two basic questions and discusses their implications for firearms policy, practice, and research as they apply to our particular offender population: adult male felons incarcerated in state prisons. We must emphasize here and elsewhere that our data do not permit us to speak for all offender groups. It is quite possible that other criminal populations--such as juvenile offenders, female offenders, first offenders, and less serious (non-felony) adult male offenders--might show very different patterns of firearms acquisition, ownership, and use, with correspondingly different implications for criminal justice response.

## Background

The research reported here developed out of a review of the available research literature on "Weapons and Violent Crime" conducted by the Social and Demographic Research Institute under a grant from the National Institute of Justice. This review concluded that there was a virtually complete absence of sound, nationally generalizable evidence on most of the important issues involved in the matter of firearms and crime--on where, how and why criminals acquire, carry, and use guns to prey upon the American population (Wright et al., 1983). Although fragments of evidence on at least some of these topics had accumulated in various studies, no comprehensive analysis of national scope had ever been undertaken.[1]

Of the many smaller scale state and local studies available on these topics, the most promising by far is the study done by Burr (1977), who obtained some very intriguing data on felons and their firearms by directly interviewing a sample of prisoners. Burr found that they were quite willing to talk about their previous criminal careers and about their acquisition and use of guns. However, since Burr's sample was based on men housed only in Florida prisons, his findings are of limited generalizability.

The study reported in this volume amounts to an extension of Burr's method to a nation-wide sample of state prison inmates. Although convicted felons are to some unknown degree a selected group of criminals, a strong case can be made on several grounds that a study based on a large sample of prisoners might produce much interesting and policy relevant information on the criminal use and abuse of guns.

---

1. For a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature on these topics up through about 1981, see Wright et al., 1983, Chs. 8 and 9. The key conclusion: "Remarkably, no nationally representative data are available on the weapons used in violent crime, with the partial exception of homicide" (p. 16).

Excepting Burr (1977), essentially all that was known about the uses of weapons in crimes up to about 1981 had been learned either from the criminal victimization surveys or from samples of firearms confiscated by the police. Since victims would only be imperfectly aware even of the presence of a weapon in a crime incident in many cases, the first of these has not proven very rich as a source of information. The second source of data, moreover, is seriously limited by methodological considerations, discussed in some detail in Brill (1977).

The consequence of the generally under-developed state of the literature at the time we initiated this study is that we did not have a rich theoretical or empirical literature on which to draw in crafting our study design. Hence, the survey was designed more to provide descriptions of motives and behaviors than to test specific theories or hypotheses about why criminals acquire and carry the equipment that they do. Given these descriptive purposes, we have avoided complex multivariate analyses of the data in favor of simpler analytic strategies.

Between 1981 and the present, several useful studies have appeared in the literature on weapons and criminal violence. We note in particular the RAND study of "Criminal Careers" (Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982), which is also based on a large survey of incarcerated criminals. Similarities between the RAND findings and our own are noted periodically throughout the text. We also note a series of studies by Cook (1981, 1982, 1983) on which we have relied heavily, especially in considering the crime of robbery. A very useful, although largely speculative, account of gun theft appears in Moore (1981). Also useful are Kleck (1984a and 1984b) and Balkin and MacDonald (1984). Constraints of space preclude a comprehensive review of these studies in present context. Suffice it to say that we have borrowed insights liberally from each of these sources.

First of all, state prisoners are accessible for study at relatively low cost. Second, although first offenders often are not imprisoned, and as a consequence would be seriously under-represented in any sample of prisoners, repeat offenders (those most likely to be imprisoned) apparently constitute the source of much criminal behavior and often of its more serious forms (e.g., Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982). Hence, the crimes committed by men most likely to be found in prison constitute a considerable portion of the overall "crime problem." Third, although juveniles by definition are excluded from such a study, many felons have long careers of crime extending back into their adolescence and perhaps earlier. Hence juvenile crime can be included in part by considering the crime careers of current prisoners. Such, in any case, were the principal rationales for the use of inmates of state prisons as sources of information for this study.

## Sampling and Data Collection

To fill the apparent gaps in our knowledge about how and why criminals obtain guns, we designed and conducted a survey of prisoners who had been incarcerated for felony offenses and were serving time in a sample of state prisons all around the country. We questioned them about their acquisition and use of guns in the period of time before their imprisonment. Self administered questionnaires were filled out by 1,874 felons in a total of eleven state prisons located in Michigan, Missouri, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Nevada, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and Massachusetts. These ten states were chosen for the research (i) to provide adequate regional dispersion in the sample, and (ii) on the basis of the state's willingness to cooperate in the research.

Work on the project began in December, 1981. The first six months were spent in negotiations for access to a set of prisons and in developing a pretest draft of the survey protocol. A draft questionnaire was pretested in June, 1982, in a county jail in Massachusetts. Data collection started in August, 1982, and continued through January, 1983. In all, 1,982 inmates serving time in eleven prisons in ten states participated in the survey. Unusable questionnaires were obtained from 108 men, leaving 1,874 cases for the actual analysis.

Our initial hope was to obtain access to the main maximum security facility in each of the selected states, on the grounds that hard-core gun using felons would be housed primarily in such institutions. In fact, in every case, the decision as to which prison we were allowed to study was made unilaterally by the state's Commissioner of Corrections. In most states, we were not granted access to the main maximum security prison, often because the safety of the field team could not be assured, and so we interviewed in some other prison instead. Ultimately, four maximum security prisons, three medium-to-maximum security prisons, and three medium security prisons were included. Except for Minnesota, we interviewed in only one prison per state; in Minnesota, we interviewed in two facilities and have combined these data in all subsequent analyses.

Eligibility criteria for participation in the survey were fairly minimal: we interviewed only men who were in prison on a felony conviction and who had been sentenced to their current term on or after 1 January 1979. No restrictions were imposed based on the felon's conviction offense; more particularly, we did not attempt to restrict the sample only to men who had committed crimes with guns.[2] Given the purposes of the study, we thought it important to have a group of unarmed criminals to serve as a comparison group. About two-fifths of the final sample claimed never to have committed any crime armed with any weapon; the remainder had.

Selection of respondents within each prison was straightforward. We attempted in preliminary negotiations with prison officials to get a crude estimate of the likely number of men in the site who would meet our eligibility criteria. If this number was fewer than about 400, we interviewed every man in the prison who agreed to participate. If the likely number of eligibles was greater than about 400, we obtained a current prisoner census and drew a simple random sample from it. In the end, it proved necessary to sample in only three sites; in the remaining seven sites, every willing participant was included.[3]

Questionnaires were administered to groups ranging from about ten men to well over a hundred men. Three members of the research staff were present during the survey sessions to answer questions, clarify instructions, etc. A Spanish-language questionnaire was available for Spanish-dominant prisoners; functional illiterates were given the survey protocol as an oral interview.

Field visits at each site varied from two to four days; survey sessions averaged about two hours each. Virtually all the sessions went smoothly. As reported by others who have surveyed prisoners, most respondents appeared to look on the protocol as a "test" and made an obvious effort to complete it accurately and well.

---

2. As it happens, a felon's conviction offense is, at best, an imperfect indicator of his actual pattern of criminality in the first place (Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982). One principal finding from the RAND study is that criminals, particularly high rate criminals, do not specialize in a particular type of crime; they are, rather, opportunists who commit any crime available to them. The same is true of the men studied in our research, as we make plain later in the text. To stratify a sample of prisoners on the basis of weapons use in the conviction offense, in short, would be intrinsically misleading; many men who did not happen to use a weapon in the conviction offense would, nonetheless, have an extensive history of armed crime.

3. It proves useful to emphasize at this point that the ten states who participated in this research do not constitute a probability sample of states; that the prisons where we interviewed in each state do not constitute a probability sample of prisons; and that the 1,874 felons who filled out the questionnaire do not constitute a probability sample of prisoners. By choosing states from all over the country in which to conduct the research, we have attempted to generate data that are national in scope and significance, but we have not by any means produced a "nationally representative probability sample" of states, prisons, or prisoners.

Given our sampling and selection procedures, precise response rates for the survey are difficult to calculate. Still, it is obvious that our response rate was remarkably good in some sites and very poor in others. In one site where a precise response rate could be calculated, we achieved a cooperation rate of 96%; in another, 22%. In general, however, the response rates were respectable: across the eight sites where a reasonable estimate of the response rate could be made, we interviewed two thirds or more of the eligible respondents in five; in three sites, the response rate exceeded 80%.

The principal limitation of the survey data we have gathered lies, of course, in making inferences about criminal firearms behavior on the basis of data obtained from a very selected subset of criminals, namely, the state prison population. No sample of prisoners, for example, will contain any criminals who consistently, by luck or talent, evade apprehension and imprisonment. Of course, no one knows how large this group is, nor how much of the total crime problem is generated by their criminal activities. The prevailing opinion these days seems to be that most reasonably active criminals sooner or later do some prison time.

A second and probably more serious limitation is the substantial under-representation of juveniles, whose participation in street crime is non-trivial. Since many juvenile criminals may never persist in their criminality into adulthood, the juvenile careers of those who do may be unrepresentative. A consequence is that this study has relatively little to say about the firearms behavior of men who have yet to reach the age of majority, except in the form of recall information from those whose criminality persisted into their adult years.

Finally, first offenders are often not sent to prison, even if convicted, and are clearly under-represented in any prison sample. It is conceivable, perhaps even likely, that their patterns of firearms use are quite different from those who have longer records.

All told, our sample of incarcerated felons probably differs from the total population of criminals in the following ways: Our sample is probably older and has a longer and more sustained involvement in criminality and in the criminal justice system. The sample is also likely to have been more violent in their crime than typical criminals and to have committed more serious offenses. Moreover, the sample may be less skillful (or careful) in committing their crimes and hence more likely to be imprisoned. Finally, our sample may be less responsive to the risks encountered in a criminal career since they were not deterred by the risks of imprisonment. Hence our sample probably over-represents the "hard-core" persistent criminals. All the findings reported in this volume should be interpreted in light of this fact.

## Data Quality

Concerns about data quality arise easily when dealing with self administered questionnaires and a sample of this general sort. What confidence can one have that felons report honestly and reliably on their criminal activities? That they have made no systematic effort simply to bamboozle a research project to which they are, at best, indifferent? In short, what reason do we have to believe anything that these men have told us about themselves and their criminal pasts?

The definitive study of the quality of prisoner self-report data is Marquis (1981), a data quality analysis of the RAND "Criminal Careers" survey. In this study, data quality was assessed by comparing prisoners' self-reports with information contained in official criminal justice records. Such comparisons, of course, are not comparisons between "true" and "measured" values but are rather comparisons between two measured values, both subject to error. In general, data base management procedures within the criminal justice system leave much to be desired (e.g., Weber-Burdin et al., 1981; Rossi, Berk and Lenihan, 1980); as such, there is no guarantee that the official data are somehow "truer" or less error-prone than the self-reported data are.

Following Marquis, we also have undertaken some limited comparisons between official and survey data. It is perhaps a pertinent comment that most of the prison systems involved in our study were not in a position to supply machine-readable data on our sample without extraordinary, expensive, and time consuming efforts. Indeed, in the end, we negotiated in detail with only two sites for release of official data, and obtained these data only for one site, Michigan. This is not to imply that other states do not keep the appropriate records, only that the records are kept in ways that do not facilitate research use.

In Michigan, we drew an initial sample of 404 men, from whom 265 useable cases were obtained. We received from the Data Processing Division at the Michigan Department of Corrections a computer tape with complete criminal record data for 400 of the original 404 cases. (Four men had either died or left the prison system by the time our tape request was processed.) These circumstances therefore allow for two types of comparisons relevant to our present concerns: (i) we can compare the 265 men from the original sample who completed a useable questionnaire with the 135 who did not; this tells us whether and how respondents differ from non-respondents and is therefore a measure of self-selection bias; and (ii) we can compare survey data with official data for the 265 men for whom we have both, a direct measure of the reliability of the self-reported information.

The "official" data on the Michigan inmates are rather limited in scope, consisting of birth date, marital status, number of dependents, education, race, occupation, drug use, alcohol use, and some details on conviction offenses. Rates of missing data are distressingly high on many of the variables: birth date, race, occupation, and marital status are present for nearly all men, but 26% of the cases are missing information on educational level, 59% are missing information on drug use, 76% are missing information on alcohol use, and 83% are missing information on number of dependents.

Since participation in the survey was voluntary (in Michigan and all other sites), it is certainly possible that respondents differed significantly from non-respondents in ways that might imperil the generalizability of the research results. In Michigan, however, this was apparently not the case: respondents and non-respondents were nearly identical on every point where comparison is possible (Table 1).

Table 1

**Characteristics of Respondents and Nonrespondents: Michigan**

| | Total Sample N = (400) | Respondents (261) | Nonrespondents (139) |
|---|---|---|---|
| AGE[1] | | | |
| Mean | 21.3 | 21.5 | 21.1 |
| SD | 2.2 | 2.3 | 2.1 |
| Median | 21.0 | 21.0 | 21.0 |
| Mode | 21.0 | 21.0 | 21.0 |
| RACE | | | |
| White | 32.7 | 34.1 | 30.2 |
| Black | 65.5 | 64.0 | 68.3 |
| Indian | 0.7 | 0.8 | 0.7 |
| Mexican | 1.0 | 1.1 | 0.7 |
| MARITAL STATUS | | | |
| Married | 5.0 | 4.0 | 6.8 |
| Single | 95.0 | 96.0 | 93.2 |
| (% missing) | (4.4) | (4.6) | (4.3) |
| EDUCATION | | | |
| Mean | 9.7 | 9.8 | 9.5 |
| SD | 1.2 | 1.3 | 1.2 |
| 9th grade or less | 45.3 | 44.3 | 47.2 |
| 10-11th grade | 47.0 | 45.3 | 50.0 |
| High School (GED) | 7.0 | 9.4 | 2.8 |
| Any College | 0.7 | 1.0 | 0.0 |
| (% missing) | (25.5) | (26.4) | (23.7) |
| NUMBER OF DEPENDENTS | | | |
| Mean | 1.7 | 1.9 | 1.5 |
| SD | 1.5 | 1.7 | 1.0 |
| Median | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.2 |
| Mode | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| (% missing) | (83.2) | (81.0) | (82.7) |
| OCCUPATION | | | |
| Professional | --- | --- | --- |
| Clerical | 0.5 | 0.8 | 0.0 |
| Service Work | 2.8 | 3.5 | 1.4 |
| Farming/Mining | 1.3 | 1.6 | 0.7 |
| Skilled Trade | 1.8 | 1.9 | 1.4 |
| Unskilled | 39.0 | 39.4 | 38.1 |
| Structural | 2.3 | 2.7 | 1.4 |
| Student | 3.8 | 4.7 | 2.2 |
| None | 48.3 | 45.3 | 54.7 |
| KNOWN DRUG USE | | | |
| Episodic | 40.7 | 40.3 | 41.0 |
| Unknown | 59.2 | 59.0 | 59.9 |
| KNOWN ALCOHOL USE | | | |
| Episodic | 23.5 | 23.4 | 23.7 |
| Unknown | 76.5 | 76.6 | 76.3 |
| SENTENCED FROM DETROIT | | | |
| % From Detroit | 34.5 | 32.9 | 39.6 |

1. Age was calculated by subtracting year of birth from 1982.

(All these data, of course, are derived from the official records, since we have no survey data on the non-respondent group.) More sophisticated analyses of these data (not shown) produced identical results. In Michigan, then, we can conclude with considerable confidence that respondents and non-respondents did not differ with respect to any variable maintained in the official criminal justice records.

Comparisons between "official" and survey data among the 265 men for whom we have both show an extremely high correspondence on most variables. The correlation between the two marital status variables is .84; between the two race variables, .85; and between the two age variables, .91. Since all these correlations are short of perfect, there is clearly some error in the data (either or both sets); the magnitude of these correlations, however, implies a generally high reliability in the self-reports of major demographic characteristics.

Analysis of the self-reported data on criminal activities is restricted to information about the conviction offense and is complicated by (i) multiple conviction offenses (in both records) for much of the sample, and (ii) the inherently ambiguous meaning of many crime categories. In general, it can be assumed that the self-reported conviction offense is an account in colloquial language of what the felon actually did; the "official" conviction offense is a label from the wording used in the state Criminal Code that is the official designation of the crime of which the felon was convicted (or to which he pleaded guilty). Thus, there are plausible reasons other than reporting error that would cause the self-reported and official conviction offenses to disagree.

This in mind, it is perhaps remarkable that the conviction offense data are as consistent as they are. The measure of consistency we employed is the proportion of cases in which the official and survey data agree on the conviction offense. To illustrate, a man who told us he was in prison for rape is considered a "consistent case" if there is at least one "official" conviction offense that is a rape, no matter what other conviction offenses are also present in the official record for the commitment. The man is also considered a consistent case if he does not give rape as a conviction offense and there is no rape charge to be found within the official record.

All told, the 261 Michigan felons for whom we have survey data had 459 official conviction offenses in their records. "Consistency rates" by type of crime are as follows: Robbery, 79%. Burglary or breaking and entering, 82%. Larceny, 84%. Assault, 84%. Rape, 90%. Auto theft, 92%. Murder 92%. All of these, obviously, are large proportions of consistent responses and reflect a comforting degree of convergence between the official and self-reported data.

The principal conclusions to be derived from the foregoing analysis are straightforward: In the one site where we could inquire, we found no systematic differences between respondents and non-respondents (no selection bias); likewise, for the few variables where a comparison was possible, the agreement between self reported and "official" data was acceptably close (no reporting bias). Whether these patterns generalize to our other sites is an open question; however, most of the patterns revealed in this analysis are in accord with those reported by Marquis (1981).[4]

4. In fairness, Michigan was undoubtedly one of our more successful sites, most of all in regard to the response rate. Of the 404 men initially sampled in Michigan, 74 had become ineligible by the time we arrived: some had been transferred elsewhere, others had been paroled or released, etc. This left 330 eligible respondents of whom 265 completed a questionnaire, for a response rate of 80%. Whether the conclusions advanced in the text in regard to the absence of non-response bias would generalize to the sites where the response rate was not nearly so good is, of course, uncertain.

# Sample Description

The general circumstances of the prison population in America are reasonably well-known: in the aggregate, prisoners tend to be young males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In these regards, our sample was no exception. More than two-thirds of the sample (69%) were under age thirty, just about half (50%) were white, fewer than two-fifths (39%) had completed as much as 12 years of schooling, and, when employed, most tended to have held down jobs that were close to the bottom in wages and skill levels.[5]

Selected socio-demographic characteristics of the total US state prisoner population are given in the 1981 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics (Flanagan et al., 1981: 485-486). Comparisons between our sample demographics and the data from this source show that our sample closely resembles the total US state prisoner population on most variables.[6]

## Marriage and Family Background

Most (63%) of the prisoners in the sample had never been married; among the two-fifths who had been married at one or another time, nearly half experienced a marital breakup, whether through divorce, separation, or death. At the time of the survey, the married proportion of the sample was just under one fifth. An additional quarter were "living with a girlfriend" prior to their incarceration. About three fifths (62%) claimed to have fathered a child, a rather high level of fertility considering their average age and marital status.

The families of origin of the men in the sample tend to have been rather large. A mere 2% claimed to have had no brothers or sisters, and the median number of siblings reported was 5.0 (mean = 5.3). On average, then, the men in the sample were one of six children in their family of origin; about 14% were one of ten or more children.

The siblings of our sample are of some interest. Over half (54%) reported having a brother or sister who was arrested at one or another time; nearly two-fifths (39%) had brothers or sisters who also served prison or jail sentences. Also of considerable interest: half the respondents (52%) reported having siblings who owned rifles or shotguns, and nearly as many (44%) reported siblings who owned handguns. About a fifth of the sample (18%) had a brother or sister who showed them how to shoot a gun.

Most (about 84%) of the sample grew up in a home with the father (or, at minimum, a "man of the house") present. Many of the fathers themselves lived "outside the law." About a quarter of the fathers were reported as having been arrested at some point in their lives; just under a fifth (18%) had served prison time.

Most of our respondents were raised in homes with firearms present. About 70% of the fathers were reported as having owned a shoulder weapon; well over half (57%), as having owned a handgun; more than a third (35%), as having carried his handgun with him outside the home. Among those with a father present and with non-missing data on both relevant questions (N = 1441), 75% answered "yes" to either the rifle/shotgun or the handgun question, or both. Since only about half of all US households possess a firearm of any sort (Wright et al., 1983: Ch. 5), it is therefore clear that the sample originates disproportionately in social groups where gun ownership is high.

## The Timing of Significant Life Events

Some appreciation of the childhood and adolescent experiences of our respondents can be gleaned from Table 2, which reports data from a series of questions asking about the ages at which certain significant experiences occurred.[7]

All told, the questionnaire asked about eighteen such life events. On the average, the first of the eighteen to have occurred was firing a gun, which happened on average early in the thirteenth year. During the same year, the average respondent also had sex with a woman for the first time; about midway through the fourteenth year, the average respondent got drunk for the first time. Prior to the sixteenth birthday, the average respondent had also stolen something worth more than $50, acquired his first shoulder weapon, and smoked marijuana for the first time. The average respondent, in other words, was "into" sex, drugs, guns, and crime before he was even legally eligible to drive in most states.

During the sixteenth year, the average respondent "came of age", that is, obtained his first full-time job, moved out of the parental household for the first time, and experienced his first arrest. On average, our respondents were first arrested at age 16.6 years and were living on their own by age 16.8 years.

5. About two-fifths of the sample (39%) said they were unemployed at the time they were last arrested, some four times the national unemployment rate. Among those with a job at any time during the year prior to imprisonment, weekly take home pay averaged $226. Most of the sample (54%) felt they needed more money than they were earning "to make ends meet."

6. The principal exception to this conclusion is that our sample appears to be a bit younger on the average than it "should" be. In the total state prisoner population of the country, 63% are under the age of 30; in our sample, the figure was 69%. This disparity results from the inclusion of the Michigan State Reformatory among the prisons where we interviewed; the Reformatory houses mainly youthful offenders ages 16 - 24. Excluding the Michigan cases, the per cent of the remaining sample under age 30 is 64%.

7. To facilitate comprehension of the data shown in Table 2, we have arranged the various life events in rank order according to the average age at which each first occurred to the men in the sample. Note, however, that the standard deviations around these averages are relatively large. The rank ordering shown in the Table, in short, amounts to a presentational convenience and should not be interpreted as an invariant causal sequence.

Table 2

**The Timing of Significant Life Events**

| | Mean | SD | Median | N[1] | Percent "Never" | Percent Missing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Current Age | 27.8 | 8.1 | 26.0 | 1834 | --- | 2.1 |
| Age when R first: | | | | | | |
| Fired a gun | 13.2 | 4.4 | 13.0 | 1677 | 8.6 | 1.9 |
| Had sex | 13.7 | 2.9 | 13.8 | 1821 | 1.0 | 1.9 |
| Got drunk | 14.5 | 3.5 | 14.4 | 1679 | 8.5 | 1.9 |
| Stole $50+ | 15.1 | 4.6 | 14.7 | 1463 | 19.1 | 2.8 |
| Got long gun | 15.1 | 4.6 | 14.8 | 1233 | 31.0 | 3.2 |
| Smoked pot | 15.8 | 5.6 | 14.7 | 1544 | 15.0 | 2.7 |
| Had fulltime job | 16.4 | 2.6 | 16.2 | 1729 | 6.0 | 1.7 |
| Got arrested | 16.6 | 5.7 | 15.8 | 1841 | 0.9 | 0.9 |
| Lived on own | 16.8 | 3.1 | 16.7 | 1687 | 8.5 | 1.5 |
| Did hard drugs | 17.1 | 4.5 | 16.4 | 1113 | 36.7 | 3.9 |
| Sawed off gun | 17.8 | 4.1 | 16.8 | 372 | 74.3 | 5.8 |
| Got hand gun | 18.1 | 5.6 | 17.1 | 1154 | 34.7 | 3.7 |
| Hurt someone | 18.8 | 7.0 | 17.2 | 937 | 46.1 | 3.9 |
| Did felony | 19.0 | 6.8 | 17.6 | 1791 | --- | 4.4 |
| Convicted | 19.2 | 6.4 | 17.8 | 1831 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| Sent to prison | 19.2 | 6.4 | 17.8 | 1830 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| Did armed crime | 19.8 | 7.0 | 17.9 | 1110 | 36.8 | 4.0 |
| Did handgun crime | 19.8 | 7.1 | 18.0 | 819 | 51.2 | 5.1 |

1. Sample size for which mean, SD, and median have been computed.

Early in the seventeenth year, our average respondent had also begun experimenting with hard drugs; as we discuss later, about a third (31%, N = 1659) were destined eventually to become drug addicts, and roughly another third (30%, N = 1665), to become alcoholics.

Between the eighteenth and twentieth birthdays, the life of our average respondent went from bad to worse: he obtained his first handgun, on average, at age 18.1 years, seriously hurt or tried to kill someone at age 18.8 years, committed his first felony at age 19.0 years, was first convicted and sent to prison or some other correctional facility at age 19.2 years, and committed his first armed crime at age 19.8 years.

The life histories of the sample during its twenties can be summarized rather more quickly: most of early adulthood was spent in prison. The mean age of the sample is 27.8 years; the mean age at first imprisonment, 19.2 years. On average, then, 8.6 years transpired between the first imprisonment and the time of our study. The average respondent spent 5.0 of those years behind bars, typically not all of it in a single stretch: indeed, the average respondent in the study had been arrested 9.9 times, convicted 4.3 times, and imprisoned 3.1 times by the time we interviewed him.[8]

Table 3

**Juvenile Criminality**

(1) "What kind of crime was your first pretty serious crime?"

| | |
|---|---|
| Burglary.....22% | Assault.....10% |
| Robbery.....20% | Drug related.... 5% |
| Theft, Larceny...11% | Homicide..... 6% |
| Auto Theft.....10% | All others.....16% |

(N = 1707)

(2) "How often did you do crimes before age 18?"

| | Never | Once | A Few | 10-15 | Dozens/ Hundreds | (N=) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assault (.73)[1] | 53 | 9 | 24 | 6 | 8 | 1749 |
| Burglary (.78) | 41 | 8 | 24 | 8 | 18 | 1746 |
| Drug Related (.75) | 62 | 2 | 13 | 4 | 18 | 1738 |
| Murder (.61) | 92 | 5 | 2 | - | 1 | 1702 |
| Rape (.60) | 94 | 4 | 2 | - | - | 1697 |
| Robbery (.68) | 67 | 7 | 15 | 4 | 7 | 1727 |
| Armed Robbery (.70) | 73 | 6 | 11 | 3 | 7 | 1710 |
| Theft (.66) | 35 | 9 | 25 | 9 | 22 | 1758 |

1. Correlation with corresponding question about adult criminality.

## Juvenile Criminality

Several recent studies have suggested that, like diabetes, "early onset" is the fatal form of the criminal disease. That is, high rate criminals usually share the common characteristic of having committed fairly serious and fairly frequent crimes while they were still juveniles. Our survey obtained several items of information about juvenile criminality; see Table 3. On the average, as we have already noted, the men in this sample commenced their criminal careers about midway in their teens: by age 15, the average respondent had already committed a non-trivial theft, by age 16 and a half, had already been arrested, and by age 19, had committed his first "pretty serious" crime.

A follow-up to this latter question asked what the felon's first "pretty serious" crime had been. Most of the sample's first felonies were economic crimes: burglary, robbery, or theft. Burglary and robbery were by far the most common "entry" crimes, mentioned by 22% and 20% respectively. Theft and automobile theft were also rather frequent, mentioned by 11% and 10%. About a tenth entered their criminal career with an assault; some 6% entered with a homicide.

8. The life history of a "typical" felon is often discussed in terms of what might be called "retarded development," especially in regard to late adolescence and early adulthood. At a time in life when most young males are completing their schooling, getting married, starting a family, and launching themselves into adult careers, the "typical" felon is already in prison. Since prison provides few or no opportunities to start a family or to accumulate seniority and experience in a "real world" job, the typical felon's life cycle development is, accordingly, retarded, and as such, at age thirty, he tends to resemble more a twenty year old in terms of educational attainment, marital status, and employment history. This pattern is frequently cited as at least part of the explanation for the adjustment difficulties faced by many felons subsequent to their release from prison. As is clear from the text, our sample also showed these same general tendencies.

There is, however, another aspect of the patterning of life events that has not received as much attention, which might be called "accelerated development" in the early adolescent years. Stated simply, our felons started doing "adult" things--having sex, getting drunk, doing drugs, leaving home, and so on--early in their teenage years, much earlier, we suspect, than "normal" teenage males. Thus, while many of these men resembled twenty year olds at age thirty, many also resembled twenty year olds at age fourteen or fifteen. It is as though they rushed very quickly into the stage of "late adolescence," and then managed to remain at more or less the same stage well into their early middle age.

Regardless of the response to the "first serious crime" question, each felon was given a list of common crimes and asked how frequently he had committed each crime "before you were 18 years old." Again, economic crimes lead the list. About two thirds (65%) had committed at least one non-trivial theft before age 18, about three fifths had committed at least one burglary, and a third had committed at least one robbery. Also, just under half (47%) had committed at least one assault.

Early involvement with drugs is also indicated in these results: about two-fifths had done drug dealing or sales before age 18. The only crimes which large majorities had not done before age 18 are therefore murder and rape (92% and 94% "never," respectively). Only 18% of the men who answered the juvenile crime sequence responded "never" to all eight questions. Thus, more than four fifths of our respondents had committed at least one of these crimes prior to their eighteenth birthday.

The rate at which these crimes were committed while the felon was a juvenile is strongly correlated with the rate at which they were committed after the felon became an adult. Each man was asked how often he had ever done each of these crimes as well as how often he had done them before age 18; correlation coefficients for the resulting pairwise comparisons range from .60 (rape) to .78 (burglary). It is therefore clear, following other recent findings, that juvenile criminality is an important predictor of adult criminality.

## Drug Abuse

We indicated earlier that the men in this sample began experimenting with drugs (including alcohol) at a relatively early age. For many, these early drug experiences were only the opening events in a life-long history of chemical dependence and substance abuse.

About a third (29%) had been alcoholics by their own admission; likewise, about a third (31%) had been drug addicts, and an equivalent portion (29%) had been admitted to a drug or alcohol rehabilitation program at some time. The crosstabulation of the "alcoholic?" and "drug addict?" questions revealed that 54% (N = 1649) claimed never to have been either; 14% had been both. If we take self-admitted dependency on either alcohol or drugs (or both) as the definition of "serious" drug abuse, then 46% of the sample would qualify.

Many of the men who did not admit to outright drug addiction did admit to a heavy pattern of drug use. Each man was presented with a list of eleven commonly used illicit drugs and asked how frequently he had used each of them before coming to prison. Majorities ranging from 51% to 81% claimed never to have used barbiturates (51% "never"), psychedelics (59% "never"), opium (62% "never"), PCP (63% "never"), heroin (66% "never"), and methadone (81% "never"). In the remaining cases, however, the majority had used the drug at least once.

Unsurprisingly, alcohol and marijuana were the most commonly used drugs among this sample, by far. A mere 7% of the sample claimed never to have used alcohol; 27% used alcohol "almost all of the time." The corresponding percentages for marijuana were 16% and 31%. Hashish, amphetamines, and cocaine were also frequently used.

As noted, some 46% of the sample was substance dependent. An upper boundary to the true fraction of drug abusers in the sample can be obtained by defining "serious drug abuse" to mean using any one of the eleven drugs "many times" or "almost all of the time." Only 26% of the total sample claimed not to have used any of these drugs many times or all the time; as a percentage of the subsample who answered at least one of the drug questions, the figure is 16%. Thus, somewhere between three-quarters and five-sixths of the sample used one or more of the eleven drugs either frequently or regularly.

To get some sense of the financial burdens imposed by these drug use patterns, we asked the drug users how much they had been spending for drugs "in the average week." Heroin users (N = 192) were averaging about $55 a week on heroin, but with a high variation around that average; alcohol users (N = 1297) were averaging about $13 a week on alcohol; users of all other drugs (N = 900) were averaging about $27 per week for drugs of various sorts. (Users who said they were not spending anything for their drugs are omitted from these calculations.)

Not all men in the sample answered the questions about drug costs; many who did answer gave a non-numeric response (e.g., "a lot," "not much," "all the money I had," etc.). Excluding both these sources of missing data, there are 1,432 men who gave complete numerical information on their drug expenses. Of these, only 11% were spending nothing in the average week for either drugs or alcohol; an additional 35% incurred only modest drug costs ($1-49). The remainder, some 54% of the sample, were spending at least $50 a week on drugs; 37% were spending $100 a week or more.[9]

Finally, we asked each man if he had been drunk or high on drugs when he committed the crime for which he was now in prison. Most had been: 41% said they were drunk, 37% said they were high; 57% had been either drunk or high (or both); 18% had been drunk and high.

These and other results reported above make it clear that the drug problem and the crime problem are intimately related.

---

9. The relationship between drug use and drug addiction is much as one would expect. Among those who used alcohol "almost all the time" (N = 445), 68% said they were or had been alcoholics; among the regular heroin users (used heroin "many times" or almost all the time, N = 216), 90% were or had been heroin addicts.

Only 22% of the sample said they "never" used drugs; another 27% said they only took drugs from time to time. A small group, 12%, used drugs only on weekends. The remainder, nearly two fifths, did drugs just about every day.

About a third (35%) confessed to having committed at least one property crime because they needed drug money; 13% of the sample had done so "many times." The tendency to have done so was positively and significantly related to all 11 questions on drug usage, with the correlation coefficient ranging from .21 to .41. The strongest correlation was for heroin use (.41), followed by methadone use (.38) and barbituate use (.36).

On the relationship between drug use and criminal violence, see also Inciardi (1981).

# A Typology of Armed Criminals

Although compared to the general male population, the men in our sample appear to be quite homogeneous in their socio-economic backgrounds, they did vary considerably among themselves in the kind and amount of their criminal activities, and, most importantly for present purposes, in their patterns of weapons use. To capture this variability, we have developed a typology of armed criminals that figures prominently in all subsequent analyses.

The typology was constructed using information from the questionnaire about (i) the type of weapon most commonly carried or used in the commission of crimes (no weapon, a knife or a club, a handgun, or whatever), and (ii) for the subset of firearms users specifically, the frequency of criminal weapons use. Initially, the sample was sorted into categories according to their responses to the following two questions:

(1) "Thinking now about all the crimes you have ever done in your life...Have you ever used a weapon to commit a crime or had any kind of weapon with you while you were committing a crime?

(2) IF YES Still thinking about all the crimes you have ever done...Have you ever used a gun to commit a crime or ever had a gun with you while you were committing a crime?"

The information from these two questions was supplemented with information on the specific types of weapons used and on the frequency with which armed crimes had been committed. The end result was the following typology:

Unarmed Criminals (N = 725 or 39%)

...prisoners for whom we could find no positive evidence anywhere in the questionnaire that they had ever used any weapons of any sort in committing their crimes.

Improvisors (N = 79 or 4%)

...men who had used weapons, but not guns or knives, in their crimes, usually a variety of ready-to-hand weapons.

Knife Criminals (N = 134 or 7%)

...men who used predominately knives and never firearms in committing their crimes.

One-Time Firearms Users (N = 257 or 14%)

...men who had committed one and only one gun crime (whatever the type of gun they used).

Sporadic Handgun Users (N = 257 or 14%)

...men who have used a handgun "a few times" in committing crimes, but never a rifle or shotgun.

Handgun Predators (N = 321 or 17%)

...men who have used handguns "many," "most," or "all" of the time in committing their crimes.

Shotgun Predators (N = 101 or 5%)

...men who claimed shoulder weapons as their most frequently used weapons and who committed more than one crime with such weapons. Since most of these persons specialized in the use of sawed off shotguns, we use the term Shotgun Predators for this group. It should be noted, however, that a few of them used other types of shoulder weapons instead.

It must be stressed that these typological categories do not represent "pure" types, in that many felons appear to carry several weapons, a handgun and a knife being the most common combination. To illustrate, 37% of the Handgun Predators, and 53% of the Shotgun Predators, were carrying more than one weapon during their conviction offense.

As one would expect, there were sharp differences across these seven groups in their patterns of prior criminality (Table 4). The modal conviction offense among the Unarmed was burglary and breaking and entering, mentioned by 28%, followed by robbery (14%), theft (10%), and rape (10%). The robbery percentage for the group was the lowest of all, and they were also much less likely than any other group to be doing time for aggravated assault.

The Improvisers are rather more distinctive. First, unlike any other group, the modal conviction offense for the Improvisors was homicide, mentioned by 28%. Indeed, their homicide percentage was the highest of all and was more than twice the percentage registered for the total sample. The group's figure for aggravated assault was also distinctively higher than the average--22% vs. 13% in the total sample.

It would therefore appear likely that our category of Improvisors contains a fair-sized proportion of so-called criminals of passion--not hardened, calculating felons. Consistent with this depiction, their robbery percentage was among the lowest recorded in the table.

Among Knife Criminals, the modal conviction offense was burglary (24%), followed closely by robbery (22%), then aggravated assault (18%), rape (16%), and homicide (15%). The Knife Criminals, interestingly, were much more likely to be doing time on a rape charge than any of the other groups.

Finally, as might be anticipated, the modal conviction offense among all four categories of firearms criminal was robbery, with percentages ranging from 37% to 50%. Among the One-Time Firearms Users, robbery was followed by homicide (21%), then aggravated assault (18%). In the remaining three categories, burglary was the next most frequently mentioned conviction offense, followed in turn by either aggravated assault or some kind of weapons charge. It should also be noted that the Predators (both groups) showed the highest average number of conviction offenses of any group.

Table 4

**Conviction Offense Data (Self-Reported) by Criminal Type**

| | | TYPE[1] | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | UNA | IMP | KNI | ONE | SPO | HGP | SGP |
| N = | 1874 | 725 | 79 | 134 | 257 | 257 | 321 | 101 |
| Conviction Offense | | | | | (% YES)[2] | | | |
| Arson | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Simple Assault | 4 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 5 |
| ADW | 13 | 5 | 22 | 18 | 18 | 13 | 16 | 27 |
| Auto Theft | 7 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 9 | 11 |
| Burglary | 25 | 28 | 25 | 24 | 12 | 27 | 26 | 28 |
| Counterfeiting | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Drug Possession | 7 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 12 | 9 |
| Drug Sales | 6 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| Forgery | 5 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Fraud | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Kidnapping | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 9 |
| Homicide | 12 | 6 | 28 | 15 | 21 | 9 | 14 | 13 |
| Manslaughter | 3 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Stolen Property | 5 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 8 |
| Rape | 9 | 10 | 7 | 16 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 4 |
| Other Sex Offense | 6 | 8 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 |
| Robbery | 30 | 14 | 25 | 22 | 37 | 50 | 44 | 40 |
| Theft | 10 | 10 | 12 | 9 | 7 | 9 | 14 | 16 |
| Weapons Charge | 10 | 3 | 3 | 9 | 13 | 11 | 21 | 23 |
| $\bar{X}$ N of Conviction Offenses | 1.51 | 1.21 | 1.47 | 1.57 | 1.48 | 1.61 | 1.99 | 2.01 |
| Armed at the Time?[2] | | | | | | | | |
| YES | 54 | 1 | 62 | 79 | 82 | 71 | 80 | 81 |
| NO | 46 | 99 | 38 | 21 | 18 | 29 | 20 | 19 |
| (N =) | (1509) | (470) | (69) | (122) | (232) | (231) | (299) | (86) |
| IF ARMED: with what?[3] | | | | | | | | |
| (N =) | 810 | 6 | 43 | 96 | 191 | 165 | 239 | 70 |
| % Handgun | 59 | -- | 9 | 3 | 70 | 73 | 81 | 34 |
| % Any Long Gun | 25 | -- | 0 | 5 | 24 | 17 | 24 | 63 |
| % Any Knife | 41 | -- | 9 | 88 | 16 | 23 | 34 | 51 |
| % Any "Other" | 22 | -- | 79 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 13 | 23 |
| $\bar{X}$ N of Weapons Mentioned | 1.4 | -- | 0.6 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.8 | 2.4 |
| % Carrying 2 or More Weapons | 23 | -- | 5 | 6 | 12 | 19 | 37 | 53 |
| Other | | | | | | | | |
| $\bar{X}$ Prior Arrests | 9.9 (1680) | 6.7 (650) | 8.9 (72) | 9.7 (126) | 7.5 (229) | 12.3 (231) | 16.4 (293) | 14.4 (79) |
| $\bar{X}$ Prior Convictions | 4.3 (1748) | 3.3 (672) | 4.4 (75) | 4.7 (126) | 3.2 (238) | 5.0 (244) | 6.4 (305) | 4.8 (88) |
| $\bar{X}$ Prior Incarcerations | 3.1 (1719) | 2.6 (665) | 3.5 (74) | 3.7 (125) | 2.7 (230) | 3.4 (240) | 3.8 (300) | 3.8 (85) |

1. Categories of TYPE: UNA = Unarmed Criminal, IMP = Improvisor, KNI = Knife Criminal, One = One-Timer, SPO = Sporadic, HGP = Handgun Predator, SGP = Shotgun Predator.

2. Missing data omitted item by item.

3. Multiple responses are possible.

The question on conviction offense was followed by a sequence asking for some details about the incident, specifically, whether the offender had been armed with any kind of weapon at the time. These data are also shown in Table 4. In the total sample, just over half (54%) had been armed during their conviction offense, a figure that varied from 1% (of the Unarmed) to 82% (of the One-Timers). In general, the "armed at the time?" question gave the results one would expect: about four fifths of the Handgun Predators, Shotgun Predators, One-Time Firearms Users, and Knife Criminals had been armed during the conviction crime, as had been 71% of the Sporadic Handgun Users and 62% of the Improvisors. As is obvious from the table, most were armed with the weapon one would expect given their placement within the typology.

The survey contained additional questions asking about all the crimes the respondents had ever committed (not just the conviction offense). Summarizing briefly, the Predators (both groups) were the most likely to have committed every kind of crime we asked about (rape being the only exception), and to have committed each kind of crime at a higher than average rate. In all cases, the reported information on weapons use in these crimes was consistent with the respondent's placement within our typology.

In order to summarize the information contained in the criminal history sequence, we created a "total criminality" index. The sequence asked about seven major crime types: assault, burglary, drug dealing, homicide, rape, robbery, and theft. Seriousness scores for each of these seven crime types were derived from recent work published by Wolfgang (1980) in which a national sample of Americans was asked to rate the seriousness of a large number of different crimes. Wolfgang's scores were used to weight the frequencies recorded for each of the seven crime types.

Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations of the resulting Total Criminality Index, first for the total sample then separately for each of the seven categories of the typology. The numbers do not have any intuitively obvious meaning except that the higher the Total Criminality Index, the more serious and more frequent was the total set of crimes admitted by the felon.

Table 5

**"Total Criminality" by Criminal Type**

| | $\bar{X}$ | SD | SUM | % of TOTAL SUM |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TOTAL | 139 | 190 | 260,285 | 100% |
| Unarmed | 61 | 113 | 44,011 | 17% |
| Improvisors | 101 | 140 | 8,005 | 3% |
| Knife Criminals | 109 | 129 | 14,560 | 6% |
| One-Time | 84 | 136 | 21,677 | 8% |
| Sporadic | 151 | 158 | 38,773 | 15% |
| Handgun Predators | 332 | 232 | 106,453 | 41% |
| Shotgun Predators | 265 | 269 | 26,807 | 10% |

The overall sample mean was 139. As would be expected, the lowest category mean was found for the Unarmed Criminals (mean = 61), followed, interestingly, by the One Time Firearms Users (mean = 84).

Judging from the "total criminality" result, these two categories contained mostly "soft-core" felons--men who had committed fewer crimes and less serious crimes than the others.

The Improvisers (mean = 101) and the Knife Criminals (mean = 109) formed a second distinctive cluster--clearly more criminal overall than the Unarmed and the One-Timers, but well below the remaining categories. Then, about midway between this last set of categories and the truly high rate felons, one finds the Sporadic Handgun Users (mean = 151).

Finally, there are the Predators, whose scores were sharply higher than the scores obtained in any of the other categories. Among the Shotgun Predators, the mean = 265, and among the Handgun Predators, who are clearly the most active and most violent of them all, the mean = 332. The men we have labelled Predators are clearly omnibus felons who, one imagines, committed more or less any crime they had the opportunity to commit.

As shown in the third column of the table, the sum of the "total criminality" index over the entire sample was about 260,000. The percentage of this total sum accounted for by each of the seven categories is shown in the fourth column.

The Unarmed Criminals amounted to about 39% of the total sample, but accounted for only 17% of the total crime this sample has committed. The Predators (handgun and shotgun combined), in contrast, amounted to about 22% of the sample and yet accounted for 51% of the total crime. If one adds the Sporadics in, we are dealing with just over a third of the total sample and just under two-thirds of the total crime. Thus, when we talk about "controlling crime" in the United States today, we are talking largely about controlling the behavior of these men.

# Patterns of Weapons Ownership and Use

## Overall Patterns

Data on gun ownership and use among our respondents show that three quarters of the men had owned one or more firearms at some time in their lives. (This amounts to just over 1300 men, the subsample on which all the rest of this section is based.) A little more than half (57%) owned a gun at the time of their last arrest; of these, most (78%) owned a handgun; 34% owned a rifle, and 44% owned a shotgun.

Men in the sample who had ever owned guns tended to have owned them in what appear to be fairly large numbers. Indeed, the modal number of guns of all types ever owned was "more than ten," and the average (mean) number ever owned among those having owned at least one was 6.6 firearms. This can be loosely contrasted with the average number of guns owned among all US families owning at least one gun, which is about 3.2 firearms (Wright et al., 1983: 40).[10]

Gun owning criminals were also much more likely ever to have owned handguns than gun-owning families at large appear to be. Available data suggest that about a quarter of all US families, and thus about a half of all gun-owning families, possess at least one handgun (Wright et al., 1983: Chs. 2 - 5); among the men in our sample who had ever owned any firearm, 87% had owned at least one handgun.

As with firearms in general, these men also tended to have owned handguns in large numbers: again, the modal response to the "how many handguns" question was "more than ten" and the mean number owned among those ever owning at least one was 6.2 handguns. More than three quarters of those ever owning any firearm had also owned at least one shotgun and a similar proportion had owned at least one rifle.

Men who had ever owned a gun were asked whether they had ever registered any of their guns with police or other authorities, and also whether they had ever applied for a permit to purchase or carry their guns. The strong majority response was "no" in both cases (75% and 85% respectively). In general, the tendency not to have done these things was about the same in every state, regardless of state laws mandating one or the other of these measures.

Most of the gun owners in the sample (61%) made it a practice to keep their gun(s) loaded at all times; how this compares with normal practice among legitimate gun owners is unknown.

Interestingly, only 28% of our gun owners said that they had ever acquired a gun specifically for use in crime. Since at least half of our respondents had committed at least one gun crime at some point in their lives, it follows directly that many of the firearms that are ultimately used in crime are <u>not</u> acquired specifically for that purpose.

Regarding the actual uses of guns, almost half (49%) of the gun owners admitted to having <u>threatened</u> to shoot someone at some time. Apparently, these were not idle threats: half of the sample also claimed to have <u>actually fired</u> their guns at human targets at some time. A crosstabulation of these two items showed that among those who had ever threatened to shoot someone, 75% actually did.

Men who indicated that they had actually fired a gun at somebody (military service excluded) were asked about the circumstances in which this took place. The most common circumstance by far, mentioned by 66%, was one in which the felon felt the need "to protect myself." The next most common circumstance mentioned for firing a gun at somebody was "while committing a crime" (noted by 39%), followed by "during a gang fight" (32%), while leaving the scene of a crime (29%), during a drug deal (29%), and "in a bar or tavern" (27%). All other possibilities were noted by 20% or less.

Men who indicated that they had fired a gun at someone were asked whether they had managed to inflict a wound in the process; most (69%) reported that they had. And of those who managed to inflict a wound, 80% said they had intended to do so; accidental woundings were indicated in only 20% of the relevant cases.

Finally, we asked our gun owners how often they fired their guns. A tenth responded "never," and another third said only once or a few times a year. On the other hand, the majority (57%) fired their gun(s) once a month or more, on the average; and almost a fifth fired them several times a week. It would be useful to compare these results with comparable data on legitimate firearms owners, but the relevant data do not exist.

It would be wrong to infer from the above results that most of these firings involved some sort of criminal activity. Most of the gun firing that these men did would qualify as sporting or recreational. Indeed, the most common situation in which their guns were fired was "target shooting, plinking" (35%), hunting (17%), or a combination of target shooting and hunting (19%). Adding "at a gun club or shooting range" to the above three responses, sporting and recreational usage accounted for nearly three-quarters of the gun firing in this sample. The remaining quarter was divided nearly equally between firing "in self defense" (14%) and firing during the course of a crime (11%).

Like other men of similar age and circumstances, these men clearly used firearms rather frequently in sport and recreational applications; unlike other men, they

10. We stress that this is a loose contrast only. The figure reported in the text for the average number of guns owned among gun owning US families is based on responses to a question about the number of guns presently owned; the question in our survey asks how many guns the felon has ever owned. So far as we know, a question on the number ever owned has never been asked in a national survey of gun owners; by definition, it would have to be greater than 3.2, and could conceivably be much greater than 3.2. It is certainly possible, in other words, that the average number of guns ever owned by felons is no greater than the average ever owned by gun owners in general.

also sometimes used them for illicit criminal purposes as well, to which we now turn attention.

## Patterns of Weapons Use: The Conviction Offense

As indicated earlier, our study asked for considerable details concerning the weapons these men carried during their conviction offense. To set the stage, we note some of the circumstances of the conviction crime itself. According to their own reports, about 39% of our respondents were unemployed or looking for work at the time of their conviction crime; almost half (49%) were either "broke" or "short on money"; and substantially more than half (57%) were either drunk, high on drugs, or both. Only about a quarter were "worried about getting caught."

Although just over 60% of our sample had committed at least one armed crime at some point, only about 54% (of those who answered the relevant question; N = 1509) were actually armed during the crime for which they were then in prison. This 54% amounts to 810 men who admitted to carrying a weapon during their conviction offense, the subsample on which most of the following analysis is based.

The handgun was, by far, the weapon of choice among those who were armed during the conviction offense. All told, 60% of these men (N = 796) were armed with a handgun at the time. About 15% were armed with sawed-off equipment; 11% were armed with unmodified shoulder weapons. About 40% carried a knife during the conviction offense; another 16% were armed with some other weapon (e.g., straight razor, brass knuckles, explosives, martial arts weapons, etc.)

As is obvious from the total of these percentages, the carrying of multiple weapons during the conviction offense was fairly common. Of the 789 men who answered all the questions about the kinds of weapons carried during the conviction crime, 25% reported carrying more than one weapon, a handgun and a knife being the most common combination. (Almost ten percent reported carrying three or more weapons during the conviction offense.) As would be expected, the tendency to carry multiple weapons was especially pronounced among the Predator groups, among whom 43% were armed with more than one weapon during their conviction crime. (Among the Sporadics, the figure was about 20%; and in the other categories of the typology, on the order of 10% or less.)

Given this pattern of multiple weapons carrying, there is some ambiguity in sorting the sample out into firearms and non-firearms criminals. If, however, we give precedence to the carrying of a firearm (as in the development of the typology), then about three-quarters (72%) of the men who were armed during the conviction offense were armed with a firearm of one sort or another (even if they were also armed with something else), and the remaining quarter (28%) were armed with something other than a firearm. The cross-tabulation of this variable with other items from the conviction offense sequence is shown in Table 6.

Men who had been armed with a firearm during the conviction offense were asked whether the gun was actually fired during the crime. Surprisingly, nearly two-fifths (39%) responded yes, which implies a notable readiness to use the weapon(s) being carried. More detail on the firing of guns during the conviction offense is presented later.

Table 6

**Weapons Use In Conviction Offenses**

| | During conviction offense, felon was armed with: | |
|---|---|---|
| | Firearm (N=580) | Something Else (N=230) |
| 1. Was the gun actually fired during the crime? | | |
| NO | 61 | -- |
| YES | 39 | -- |
| 2. Did you bring your weapon with you..., or get it at the scene? | | |
| BROUGHT IT WITH ME | 79 | 66 |
| GOT IT AT SCENE | 12 | 23 |
| BOTH | 9 | 11 |
| 3. Did you actually use your weapon...in committing that crime, or did you just have it with you... | | |
| JUST HAD IT | 24 | 42 |
| ACTUALLY USED IT | 76 | 58 |
| If "ACTUALLY USED IT:" How did you use the weapon? | | |
| 4. To Scare Victim: % YES | 69 | 44 |
| (N) | (407) | (118) |
| 5. To Injure Victim: % YES | 16 | 26 |
| (N) | (407) | (117) |
| 6. To Kill Victim: % YES | 18 | 16 |
| (N) | (404) | (117) |
| 7. To Get Away: % YES | 26 | 18 |
| (N) | (407) | (116) |
| 8. To Protect Myself: % YES | 38 | 32 |
| (N) | (406) | (117) |
| 9. Did you plan to use the weapon in the way you did, or was it something that just happened... | | |
| PLANNED TO USE | 44 | 26 |
| JUST HAPPENED | 56 | 74 |
| N = | (346) | (103) |

Another question in the sequence asked whether the felon brought his weapon(s) with him to the scene of the crime, or whether the weapon(s) had been acquired at the scene. The large majority of both types of felons brought their weapons with them: the majorities amounted to 79% of those who were armed with a firearm during the conviction crime and 66% of those armed with something else. Thus, most armed crime (whatever the type of weapon) apparently involves at least some minimal degree of premeditation--enough advance thought, at least, to bring one's weapons along.

To have carried a weapon during the conviction offense is not necessarily the same as actually using the weapon to commit the offense. We asked the sample whether they had actually used their weapon in committing the crime, or whether they just had it with them. Majorities of both types reported that they

actually used the weapon in some way, but the majority was considerably larger (76%) among those armed with a gun than among those armed with "other" weapons (58%). Judging from these results, some three-quarters of the men who committed crimes while armed with a gun actually used the gun in some fashion in the course of that crime.

Felons who indicated that they had in fact used the weapon in some way were then asked, "How did you use the weapon?" "To scare the victim" was by far the most common usage among both types, mentioned by 69% of those armed with a gun and 44% of those armed with other weapons. A principal motive for the use of weapons in crime, and especially for the use of guns in crime, is apparently to intimidate the victim into quick and ready capitulation to the offender's demands. "To protect myself" was the next most frequent response in both categories, noted by 38% and 32% respectively.

The use of weapons to injure or kill the victim was predictably much less common than the use of weapons for purposes of intimidation; still, 18% of those armed with a gun, and 16% of those armed with something else, said they used the weapon to kill the victim during their conviction offense. (It should be mentioned that about 15% of the total sample were doing time on a homicide or manslaughter charge.) Interestingly, the use of the weapon to injure the victim was somewhat more frequent among those armed with something else (26%) than among those armed with a gun (16%). This pattern is consistent with findings reported by Cook (1980) and others, namely, that in robberies at least, the overall injury rate is higher among non-gun robberies than among gun robberies (presumably because people who are being robbed at gun point are less likely to resist).

The final question in the sequence asked those who had used their weapon in some way to commit the crime whether they had planned to use the weapon, or whether it "just happened." Advance planning for the use of the weapon was the minority report in both cases. Still, among those armed with a gun, some 44% indicated that they had planned to use the gun in the way that they did. (Among the "something else" group, the figure was 26%).

All told, there were 156 men in the sample who were armed with a gun during the conviction offense, who also used the gun in some way in committing that offense, and who, finally, indicated that they had planned on using the gun in the way that they did. As one might anticipate, most of these 156 men (73%, to be precise) were in prison on a robbery charge. Some 27% were in on a weapons charge, 22% on an aggravated assault or "assault with a deadly weapon" charge, 15% on a burglary charge, and 10% on a homicide charge. (Given the total of these percentages, many of these men were clearly in prison on more than one charge, a robbery charge and a weapons violation being the most common combination.) Also unsurprisingly, 57% of them fell into the two predatory categories of our typology.

Interestingly, among those who were armed with a gun during the conviction offense and who actually used the gun in committing the offense, the tendency to have fired the weapon was much lower among those who planned on using the gun than among those who did not. Among those who had planned on using the weapon, 28% reported firing the weapon during the crime; among those who had not "plan(ned) on using the weapon in the way that you did," 70% report having fired the weapon. Percentaging in the other direction, only 24% of those who reported having fired their gun during the conviction offense also reported having planned to use the weapon in that way.

The strong implication of these findings is that most firings of guns in criminal situations are unplanned. The "plan," to the extent that there was one, was presumably to intimidate the victim and to use the weapon to that end. The actual firing of the weapon was, one senses, a rather unwanted by-product of a situation that "goes sour" for whatever reason: the victim resisted rather than capitulated, the police arrived at the scene, or the offender encountered some difficulty in effectuating his escape. Whatever the reason, however, the finding is reasonably clear: most of the men who actually fired guns in criminal situations claimed to have had no prior intention of so doing.[11]

As would be expected, how the gun was in fact used in a crime situation varied rather sharply depending on whether or not it was fired (Table 7). By far the most common use in the case of unfired weapons was to intimidate the victim (89%); in contrast, the most common use in the case of fired weapons was "to protect myself" (48%). Injury to the victim was predictably much more common in cases when the gun was fired (26%) than when it was not (9%), as was the victim's death (36% to 3%).

Table 7

**How Guns Are Used in Crimes, Depending on Whether Or Not They Were Fired: Conviction Offenses**

| "How did you use the weapon?" | | Was Gun Fired? NO | YES |
|---|---|---|---|
| To Scare Victim: | % YES | 89 | 45 |
| | (N) | (218) | (184) |
| To Injure Victim: | % YES | 9 | 26 |
| | (N) | (218) | (184) |
| To Kill Victim: | % YES | 3 | 36 |
| | (N) | (217) | (182) |
| To Get Away: | % YES | 26 | 28 |
| | (N) | (218) | (184) |
| To Protect Myself: | % YES | 31 | 48 |
| | (N) | (217) | (184) |

1. Table is based on those who were armed with a gun at the conviction offense, and who used the gun to commit the offense.

11. On the other hand, it is worth emphasizing that 39% of the men in the sample who were armed with a gun during the conviction offense reported having fired it during that offense. Despite the apparent lack of prior intention, in other words, these men clearly had few compunctions about opening fire when the situation seemed to demand it. Perhaps the most sensible reading of these results is that while our felons appear not to have planned to pull the trigger, relatively few of them planned not to either.

# Patterns of Weapons Use: Other Offenses

For most of our sample, the conviction crime is only the most recent in a fairly long series of criminal activities. Many of the questions that we asked about the conviction offenses were also asked about the more general use of weapons in committing crimes; results from these "more general" questions are reported in the present section. For simplicity, our four categories of Gun Criminals are collapsed into one for this analysis, as are the two categories of "Armed, Not with a Gun."

As in the conviction offense data, handguns are by far the preferred weapon among gun criminals. Among those who had ever committed a gun crime, 90% had used a handgun for at least one of them; 85% stated that the handgun was the weapon they used most frequently. Next in popularity was the justly infamous sawed off shotgun, indicated as a crime weapon by 27% of the gun criminals and as the most frequent crime weapon by 9%. Percentages having used other kinds of firearms at least once in committing a crime were 16% for unmodified shotguns, 10% for unmodified rifles, and 7% for sawed off rifles.

Men who had committed armed crime, but not with a gun, used mainly knives and a motley assortment of other weaponry. Among this group (N = 177), 38% had used a buck knife at least once and 24% indicated the buck knife as the weapon used most frequently. Next in popularity was the pocket knife (34% having used one at least once, 23% indicating it as the most frequently used weapon) and the club (34% and 14% respectively). "Other" weapons used by these men included switchblades, hunting and butcher knives, brass knuckles, straight razors, mace, pieces of chain, martial arts weapons, baseball bats, etc.

Both groups of armed criminals were asked how often they were armed when they did their crimes. The most substantial difference between the two groups was the percentage responding, "only once." Among the gun criminals, 26% claimed to have been armed only once (these, of course, are the One-Timers in our typology); among the armed--not with a gun--group, the corresponding percentage is 38%. About a third of both groups said they were armed "a few times." To have been armed "many times," "most of the time," or "all of the time" was characteristic of 40% of the gun criminals and 28% of the other group.

## Weapon Carrying Behavior

The next question in the sequence was intended to explore the issue of habitual carrying of weapons. The question read as follows:

"Some of the men we have talked to tell us they were in the habit of carrying a weapon with them pretty much all the time, even on days when they were not planning to do any crimes. Other men tell us that they were in the habit of carrying a weapon only in certain situations--for example, when they were going out drinking--again, whether they planned to do a crime or not. Still others tell us that they only carried a weapon when they were planning to do a crime. Which of these are you most like?"

Responses were very similar for gun criminals and others (Table 8). The majority response in both cases was to have carried weapons "only in certain situations," the pattern for 51% of the gun criminals and 53% of the others. The next most frequent response was to have carried a weapon all the time, the pattern for about a third of both groups. The least common pattern in both cases was to have carried a weapon only when planning a crime, indicated by 19% of the gun criminals and 13% of the others. It therefore appears that most of the weapons that are used in crimes, be they firearms or other weapons, were not carried specifically for that purpose. One should, of course, not be misled by these results. To ask whether a felon carried a gun on days when he was "planning to do a crime" assumes that these men somehow "plan" their criminal activities. In contrast, as we have stressed, most of them were clearly opportunists whose "plan," so to speak, was to be ready whenever the opportunity presented itself. Among the more predatory felons in the sample, committing crime is an integral aspect of daily existence; it is not as though they wake up some mornings expecting to do a crime (and therefore prepare themselves by carrying a gun) and on other mornings expecting not to. In this context, the distinction between "general purpose" carrying and carrying specifically for criminal purposes becomes ambiguous to say the least.

Table 8

**Weapon Carrying Behavior by Weapon Type**

| | TYPE | |
|---|---|---|
| Carried a weapon: | Gun | Other Weapon |
| All the Time | 30 | 34 |
| Only in Certain Situations | 51 | 53 |
| Only When Planning A Crime | 19 | 13 |
| (N=) | (788) | (131) |

In by far the largest majority of cases, then, weapons were available for use in crimes either because of a tendency to carry weapons all the time or through a practice of carrying weapons in particular situations. The follow-up questions concerning these "situations" were quite revealing. The most common by far was "whenever I thought I might need to protect myself," mentioned by 83-84% of both groups.

As we see later, self-protection figures prominently as a claimed motive in the weapons behavior of these men. Given the lifestyles involved, this is no doubt a genuine motive in some cases; in other cases, it is no more than a self-serving rationalization, if for no other reason than that men like these who carry guns routinely to "defend themselves" against the endemic violence of their environment contribute to the hostility of the environment by the very act.

Other situations in which these men would tend to carry weapons include: when doing a drug deal (mentioned by 47% of the relevant gun criminals and 30% of the others), when going to a strange part of the city (mentioned by 50% and 46%, respectively), "at night" (34% and 41%), when they were with others who were carrying weapons (34% and 23%), etc. Most of these are clearly variations on the "self defense" theme.

We further note: a man who tends to carry a weapon whenever he thinks he might need to protect himself, or whenever he is going to a strange part of the city, or whenever it is dark out, etc. clearly tends to carry his weapon(s) on a pretty regular basis, if not quite "all the time." These points in mind, we appear to be dealing, in reality, with only two types of weapons carrying behavior--habitual carrying for general purposes, and premeditated carrying for the specific purpose of committing crimes. And it is the former pattern that predominated, quite heavily, among the armed criminals in our sample.

An analysis of the "all the time" response to the carrying question showed that the strongest correlates were whether the felon's family, friends, and associates owned and/or carried firearms. The effects of gun ownership and carrying among the felon's associates and friends--"the people you hung around with before you came to this prison"--were particularly striking. One item asked how many of these people themselves owned a gun; responses correlated .20 with the tendency for the felon himself to carry "all the time." Another item asked how many of the felon's associates owned a handgun; responses to this item correlated .24 with the felon's own carrying. Still another item asked, "about how many of them ... made a habit of carrying a handgun with them outside their home?" This item correlated .32 with the felon's own carrying behavior, and this was the single strongest correlate revealed in this analysis.[12]

The implication, clearly, is that the single most important reason why a felon might decide to carry a gun more or less all the time is that he associates with other men who carry guns routinely.

The tendency to carry "all the time" was also correlated with other aspects of weapons behavior. The carrying question, for example, correlated .24 with the number of guns ever owned and .30 with the number of handguns ever owned. Felons who carried "all the time" were also more likely to keep their gun(s) loaded (r = .22) than others, and they tended to fire their guns more often (r = .29). They were also more likely to have threatened to shoot someone (r = .25), and to have actually shot someone (r = .30) than those who carried less regularly. Finally, and predictably, the men who carried a gun "all the time" tended to be high-rate criminals; the carrying question correlated at .29 with our Index of Total Criminality.

The tendency to carry a gun "all the time" was especially pronounced among our Predators (Table 9). Among gun criminals in general, recall, about 30% said they carried a gun more or less all the time; among the Shotgun Predators, the figure rose to 40%, and among the Handgun Predators, to just over 50%. Thus, the Predators stand out from other groups because of their routine and habitual carrying of firearms.

Table 9

**Gun Carrying Behavior by Criminal Type**

| | TYPE | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carried a gun: | One-time | Sporadic | Handgun Predator | Shotgun Predator |
| All the Time | 13 | 14 | 51 | 40 |
| Only in Certain Situations | 64 | 57 | 39 | 49 |
| Only When Planning A Crime | 22 | 29 | 10 | 11 |
| (N= | (179) | (235) | (292) | (82) |

By far the most common usage of weapons in committing crime was intimidation of the victim, as in the conviction offense data. The second most frequent use in both cases was for "self protection," mentioned by 50% of the gun criminals and by 44% of those armed--not with a gun. "To get away" was third (noted by 35% and 25% of the two groups), followed by "to injure the victim" and "to kill the victim," respectively. One gun criminal in six in this sample said he had used a gun to kill a victim in the course of a crime. Finally, a majority (57%) of the gun criminals reported having fired a gun at least once in the course of a crime, and of these, 25% reported having killed somebody at some time.

## Gun Ownership and Use in Crime

Not all gun owners in the sample have committed gun crimes; not all gun criminals have owned guns. The relationship between having owned guns and having committed crimes with them is shown in Table 10. Among non-owners, 18% had committed at least one gun crime; among the gun-owning felons, 59% had committed at

12. It can also be mentioned in passing that the carrying question being discussed in the text was quite strongly correlated with two other questions from much later in the survey on carrying behavior (r's = .55 and .56), suggesting a considerable degree of internal consistency in the questionnaire data.

The correlation between a felon's carrying behavior and that of his associates admits of several interpretations, all probably correct to some degree. First, a felon's peers may influence his weapons carrying behavior in the same way that peers often influence one's choice of clothing; peers, that is, may define "acceptable" patterns of behavior. In this case, the correlation would bespeak little more than conformity to group-defined norms. Secondly, armed peers might constitute a threat to the felon's safety; unarmed members of armed groups may be very vulnerable to bullying and coercion. Finally, it may be a simple matter of selection; men who routinely carry guns, that is, may elect to hang out with others who do the same. Nothing in our data would allow a choice among these possibilities.

least one gun crime. On the other hand, nearly a third (32%) of the gun owners in this sample had never committed armed crime at all, whether with a gun or with some other weapon.

More interesting, perhaps, is that the tendency to have committed gun crime increased with the number of guns ever owned. Among those who had owned just one gun, 40% had committed at least one gun crime, a fraction that increased quite regularly up through and including the "ten or more guns" category, where 79% had committed at least one gun crime. Thus, the more guns a felon had owned, the more likely he was to have committed a crime with one of them.

What distinguishes gun owning felons who use their guns to commit crime from gun owning felons who do not? As it happens, a key factor implicated in this difference appears to be their gun-carrying tendencies; gun owning felons who used their guns to commit crimes were, for the most part, those who actually carried their firearms on a more or less regular basis.

To illustrate, all the handgun owners in the sample were asked if they ever carried their handguns with them outside the home--"for protection or self defense, or to use in committing crimes." Overall, 19% of the handgun owners said, "Never," and another third said that they had done so only "a few times." Thus, a small majority of the handgun owners in this sample (52% of them) were not in the habit of carrying their handgun(s) on a regular or routine basis. Among the Unarmed and the Armed-Not-with a-Gun handgun owners, this was true of some 77-84%. Even among the One-Timers and the Sporadics, some 60-70% did not carry their handguns on any regular basis. Only among the Predator groups do we find a strong majority pattern of routine handgun carrying: among the Handgun Predators, about 90% carried their handgun "many times" or all the time; among handgun-owning Shotgun Predators, this was true of 64%. Nearly half (44%) of the Handgun Predators made it a practice to carry their handgun "all the time."[13]

Table 10

**The Commission of Armed Crime as a Function of Gun Ownership**

| | Felon Has Committed | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Have you ever owned a gun? | No Armed Crime | Armed...Not with Gun | Gun Crime | (N=100%) |
| NO | 69 | 13 | 18 | (403) |
| YES | 32 | 9 | 59 | (1273) |
| IF YES: How Many? | | | | |
| ONE | 47 | 13 | 40 | (157) |
| 2 - 3 | 41 | 10 | 49 | (302) |
| 4 - 5 | 31 | 11 | 58 | (158) |
| 6 - 10 | 24 | 4 | 72 | (113) |
| 10 + | 17 | 4 | 79 | (368) |

Efforts to examine differences in criminal weapons behavior across states were largely unsuccessful since, having interviewed in only one prison per state, prison differences (e.g., according to security classifications) and state differences are perfectly confounded. The results of these efforts are therefore not reported.[14]

## Growing Up With Guns

It has been widely reported that the single best predictor of adult firearms ownership in a "normal" (that is, non-criminal) population is whether one's father had owned a gun. It is a pertinent and, so far as we know, largely unresearched question whether the ownership and use of firearms among felons is similarly influenced by the effects of early socialization.

As we have seen, most (75%) of the men in our sample had owned at least one gun at one time or another. Over 90% had fired a gun at some time; the average age at which they first did so was 13. Likewise, the average man in our sample obtained his own shoulder weapon at age 15 and his first handgun at age 18.

13. Follow-up questions probed for details on weapons carrying behavior. Those who carried regularly tended to carry the gun on their person (vs. in a car or somewhere else); the majorities ranged from 75% to 92% depending on type. "Shoved into a belt or waistband" was the most common means of carrying (46%), followed by shoulder holsters (21%), and shoved into pockets (18%). Other possibilities were mentioned by 10% or less in all cases.

We also asked where the gun was kept when it was not being carried. "Hidden away" was the modal response (54%), followed by "in a drawer" (34%), "in the bedside table" (24%), and "under my pillow" (17%). The last two responses were especially common among the Predators. In sum, even when sleeping, these men kept their firearms within easy reach.

Comparable data on carrying practices among handgun owners in general are, at best, thin. One survey (discussed in Wright et al., 1983: 142) found that 7% of all US adults, or about 29% of all handgun owners, said "yes" to the question, "Do you ever carry that handgun or pistol outside of the house with you for protection, or not?" Thus, among handgun owners in general, the practice appears to be fairly widespread. On the other hand, only 19% of the handgun owners in the felon sample responded "never" to the handgun carrying question, so about 80% of them carried their handguns outside the home at least now and again. These data are not precisely comparable but do suggest that gun owning felons carry their handguns with them outside the home much more frequently than handgun owners in general do.

14. The analytic problem is simply this: In some states, consistent with our original plan, we interviewed in the main maximum security prison within the state; in other states, access to the main maximum security prison was not allowed and we interviewed in some other prison instead. In general, as would be expected, there were very strong relationships between prison type and weapons behavior; we found more Predators in the maximum security prisons than elsewhere. This being the case, it is impossible for us to decide whether the distinctiveness of felons at a particular site reflects underlying differences that can be attributed to state-level characteristics; or alternatively, whether it is a simple compositional function of the prisoners that happened to be housed in the prison where we interviewed. Efforts to tease out the differences through complex sample weighting procedures were not persuasive.

Clearly, most of these men were exposed to firearms at a relatively early age and have owned and used guns throughout their lives.

The survey asked about firearms ownership and carrying practices among four groups of potential "socialization agents:" fathers, siblings, "the people you hung around with before you came to this prison" (hereafter, simply "friends"), and "the men in your family" (fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins). We also asked about seven "firearms socialization experiences" that many men encounter in their youth (here taken to mean prior to age 14).[15]

As indicated earlier, about 70% of the fathers of the men in the sample are reported to have owned a rifle or shotgun; more than half owned a handgun; a cross-tabulation of the two items shows that 75% had fathers who owned some sort of firearm. Among handgun owning fathers, about three-fifths carried handguns outside the home. Likewise, about half the fathers (48%) showed their son(s) how to shoot guns, and roughly the same proportion (46%) gave their son(s) firearms as gifts.

Perhaps the most significant data in the question sequence concern patterns of ownership among the felons' friends. A mere 12% of the sample reported that none of their friends owned a gun; more than two-fifths reported that most or all of them did. Figures for handgun ownership among the felons' friends were similar although somewhat lower. About 20% reported that most or all of their friends carried handguns.

Finally, concerning the "men in your family," some 36% reported that most or all of them owned a gun; 20% reported that none of them did. Less than a third (29%) of the felons reported that none of the men in the family owned a handgun; about a quarter reported that most or all of them did.

Table 11 shows the matrix of correlations among this set of questions. The seven "experience" questions are also included. One is struck by the overwhelming predominance of positive coefficients. (All but a handful of the coefficients are statistically significant.) Substantively, this pattern implies that firearms socialization is patterned and cumulative. Men in the sample who were exposed to any one of the socialization agents and experiences shown in the table were more likely to have been exposed to all the others as well.

In order to examine the effects of these early experiences on the sample's firearms behavior, we created five summated scales--one for each of the "agents" and a fifth for the "firearms experiences." It is an interesting question just how many of the men in the sample were exposed to none of the agents or experiences recorded in the table; or in other words, how many men fell at the de facto zero point on all five scales. As it happens, this is true of only 7 of the men in the sample. In short, virtually all of these

15. The experiences we asked about were: "went out shooting guns with your father" (48% said they had done so at least once), "played with toy guns" (78%), "joined the Boy Scouts" (38%), "went to a summer camp where guns were used for recreation" (14%), "went shooting at a gun club or pistol range" (19%), "went hunting" (58%), and "took apart a gun to see how it works" (36%).

To provide at least some comparative data, these same seven questions were also asked of a non-random sample of male college students at the University of Massachusetts (N = 96). Felons and college students were about equally likely to have gone out shooting guns with their fathers; on the other six items, however, there were sizable differences between the two groups. Felons were more likely than college students to have gone hunting and to have taken a gun apart to see how it worked; college students were more likely to have had the remaining four experiences.

Table 11

**Intercorrelations Among the Socialization "Agents" and "Experiences" Variables**

| | | VARIABLE[1] | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| Father Own Gun | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Father Own Handgun | 2 | .48 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Father Carry HG | 3 | .35 | .62 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Father Teach Shoot | 4 | .51 | .30 | .26 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Father Give Gun | 5 | .31 | .20 | .20 | .52 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sib Own Gun | 6 | .31 | .16 | .21 | .31 | .25 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sib Own HG | 7 | .18 | .27 | .28 | .13 | .14 | .63 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sib Teach Shoot | 8 | .14 | .10 | .14 | .21 | .13 | .37 | .37 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Friends Own Gun | 9 | .22 | .17 | .18 | .21 | .23 | .22 | .21 | .12 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Friends Own HG | 10 | .14 | .21 | .23 | .11 | .17 | .14 | .24 | .09 | .76 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Friends Carry HG | 11 | .11 | .16 | .25 | .08 | .13 | .12 | .22 | .07 | .55 | .66 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Others Own Gun | 12 | .39 | .21 | .29 | .42 | .31 | .36 | .30 | .24 | .37 | .27 | .19 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Others Own HG | 13 | .32 | .45 | .41 | .30 | .23 | .27 | .36 | .20 | .33 | .38 | .31 | .70 | | | | | | | | | |
| Others Carry HG | 14 | .18 | .30 | .45 | .18 | .19 | .20 | .31 | .16 | .27 | .34 | .44 | .39 | .53 | | | | | | | | |
| Go Out Shooting | 15 | .39 | .20 | .17 | .59 | .48 | .30 | .13 | .23 | .20 | .09 | .04 | .37 | .25 | .12 | | | | | | | |
| Camp | 16 | .07 | .08 | .08 | .13 | .14 | .07 | .08 | .03 | .09 | .13 | .13 | .08 | .13 | .17 | .14 | | | | | | |
| Club or Range | 17 | .16 | .12 | .12 | .25 | .25 | .11 | .06 | .08 | .14 | .10 | .05 | .19 | .17 | .11 | .33 | .34 | | | | | |
| Hunting | 18 | .34 | .13 | .10 | .45 | .36 | .29 | .14 | .22 | .19 | .09 | .05 | .31 | .19 | .09 | .60 | .12 | .27 | | | | |
| Boy Scouts | 19 | -.01 | .02 | .03 | .07 | .02 | -.02 | -.04 | -.03 | .04 | .05 | .00 | .03 | .02 | .05 | .04 | .17 | .15 | .04 | | | |
| Toy Guns | 20 | .02 | .04 | .03 | -.02 | -.03 | .00 | .02 | -.04 | .03 | .02 | .00 | .01 | -.01 | -.01 | .06 | .07 | .06 | .05 | .22 | | |
| Took Apart | 21 | .21 | .15 | .15 | .26 | .30 | .19 | .18 | .16 | .23 | .21 | .16 | .21 | .18 | .16 | .37 | .23 | .33 | .36 | .06 | .09 | |

1. Correlation coefficients greater than about .05 are statistically significant at the .05 level.

men had at least some exposure to firearms early in their lives.

Intercorrelations among the five scaled variables are all moderate to high (ranging from .20 to .54), positive in sign, and statistically significant. We thus emphasize: men exposed to firearms in any of these contexts are likely to have been exposed in them all.[16]

The scaled variables provide an efficient way to assess the effects of early socialization on the sample's own firearms behavior. For this purpose, we have selected 16 items of possible relevance, grouped loosely into four topical areas, as follows:

Age: How old the felon was when he (i) first fired a gun, (ii) first obtained his own shoulder weapon, (iii) first obtained his own handgun, (iv) committed his first armed crime, and (v) committed his first handgun crime.

Gun Ownership in General: Has the felon ever owned a gun, ever owned a handgun? How many guns and handguns has he ever owned? How often did he fire his guns before he came to prison?

Criminal Gun Use: Was the felon armed at the conviction offense? How often was he armed with a gun when he committed crimes? How much trouble will it be for him to obtain a handgun upon release? Is he a Predator or not?

Carrying Practices: Two questions on how often the felon carried a firearm with him outside the home.

Zero order correlations among the variables just discussed and the five scaled socialization variables are shown in Table 12. With only a few exceptions, the patterns indicated in the table are much as one would expect: the higher the felon's prior exposure to the agents and experiences of firearms socialization, the more pronounced his own firearms behavior tended to be.

Considering first the "how old were you when..." questions, we note that the correlation coefficients are predominantly negative, as would be expected. In general, the higher the degree of exposure, the younger a felon was when he first "got into" guns. The age at which he first fired a gun is correlated -.36 with the Father's Influence Scale, -.39 with the Experiences Influence Scale, and somewhat more weakly (but still negatively) with the other three Scales. The age at which the felon acquired his first firearm

16. These and similar findings based on studies of noncriminal gun owners are consistent with the idea of an "American Gun Culture," more precisely, a culture comprised of individuals and families whose ownership and use of firearms is derivative of a shared set of values transmitted through familial socialization. This is not to imply that the average gun-owning criminal in our sample is no different than the average deer hunter, skeet shooter, or gun collector. It is to imply that the average gun-owning criminal, like the average legitimate gun owner, was raised around guns and introduced early in life to their use. It may well be that there are multiple gun cultures (as, indeed, Lizotte and Bordua 1980, 1981 have suggested), some of which strongly disapprove of the illegal or quasi-legal use of guns and some of which do not. In any case, gun ownership in the population at large and among our sample of prisoners displays unmistakable cultural aspects.

Table 12

**Correlations Between Felons' Firearms Behavior and Early Firearms Socialization**

| | Socialization Influence Scales[1] | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firearms Behaviors | Father | Sibling | Peers | Male Clan | Experiences |
| AGE:[2] | | | | | |
| At 1st Firing | -.366 | -.23 | -.19 | -.26 | -.39 |
| At 1st Gun | -.38 | -.14 | -.20 | -.23 | -.31 |
| At 1st Handgun | -.18 | -.06 | -.25 | -.11 | -.08 |
| At 1st Armed Crime | -.01 | -.01 | -.14 | -.01 | .02 |
| At 1st Handgun Crime | -.07 | -.00 | -.15 | -.04 | -.00 |
| GUN OWNERSHIP[3] | | | | | |
| Ever own gun | .35 | .30 | .30 | .27 | .28 |
| IF YES: How many | .25 | .24 | .36 | .26 | .22 |
| IF YES: Own HG | .02 | .09 | .25 | .12 | -.03 |
| How many? | .18 | .22 | .39 | .20 | .16 |
| How often fire | .14 | .11 | .21 | .15 | .12 |
| CRIMINAL GUN USE | | | | | |
| Armed at conviction | .08 | .07 | .22 | .12 | .06 |
| How often armed with gun?[4] | .20 | .18 | .33 | .17 | .14 |
| Trouble to get one? | .11 | .11 | .20 | .11 | .16 |
| Predator[5] | .18 | .18 | .34 | .17 | .12 |
| Unarmed[5] | -.11 | -.14 | -.28 | -.14 | - .11 |
| CARRYING PRACTICES | | | | | |
| Carry handguns? | .11 | .06 | .28 | .14 | .03 |
| Carry firearms? | .15 | .15 | .40 | .19 | .04 |

1. Missing data have been deleted pairwise.
2. "Never" is treated as missing data for this analysis.
3. "Ever Own" was asked of everyone. Remaining questions were asked only of those who had ever owned.
4. Asked of gun criminals only.
5. TYPE is represented here by two dummy variables, one for Predators and one for Unarmed Criminals.
6. Correlation coefficients greater than about .05 are statistically significant at the .05 level.

follows a very similar pattern. In short, fathers and the experiences sons share with their fathers seem to be the predominant influence on firing and acquiring a gun for the first time.

In the remaining three cases, however, the pattern shifts somewhat; the age at which a felon acquired his first handgun, committed his first armed crime, and committed his first handgun crime were all more strongly correlated with the Peer Influence Scale than with any of the other four, a pattern that recurs elsewhere in the table.

All five influence scales were moderately to strongly correlated (.27 to .35) with whether the felon had ever owned a gun; among those who had ever owned at least one, all five variables were likewise moderately to strongly correlated (.22 to .36) with the total number of guns the felon had owned. Among those ever owning a gun, however, the tendency to have owned a handgun was strongly correlated only with the Peer Influence Scale (r = .25) and was essentially uncorrelated with the other four variables. Friends also appeared to exert a greater influence on the number of

handguns ever owned, and on the rate at which a felon fired his guns, than any of the other scales. In terms of the number of handguns owned, for example, the effect of the Peer Influence Scale was about twice that of any other.

In regard to criminal gun use and carrying practices, the general drift of the findings can be quickly summarized: firearms ownership and carrying among the felon's friends were by far the most important factors. For example, the tendency to have been armed at the conviction offense is correlated at .22 with the Peer Influence Scale and essentially uncorrelated with all other scales. Among those who have committed at least one gun crime, the frequency with which they were armed with a gun during their crimes was correlated .33 with the Peer Influence Scale, by far the strongest effect of the five. Likewise, the effects of the Peer Influence Scale on the felon's carrying practices were more than twice as great as the effects of any other variable. We note finally: whether the felon is categorized as a Predator is correlated at .34 with the Peer Influence Scale but much more weakly correlated with all other variables; the correlation of the Peer Influence Scale with the Unarmed category is -.28, again the strongest effect of the five.[17]

In short, we witness in these data a rather intriguing pattern. When considering the more normal or legitimate aspects of firearms behavior (whether the felon ever owned a gun, how many he has owned, how old he was when he first fired or acquired one, etc.), fathers appeared to be the predominant influence (reinforced, to be sure, by all the other agents of socialization as well). When considering the clearly criminal aspects of firearms behavior, however, the influence of fathers (and other family agents) paled considerably and the effects of one's peer group came to dominate.

The key "turning point" in the lives of most of these men, we suggest, was not that fine sunny day in their early adolescence when their fathers took them out to teach them the manly art of firing guns. Rather, it was when they realized that most of the people they hung around with were themselves carrying guns. Some adolescent males, of course, would respond to this information by finding new people to hang around with. Others might respond by obtaining a gun themselves, and these, it appears, were often the ones who ended up in prison.

---

17. Since, as indicated earlier, all five of the scaled socialization variables are rather strongly inter-correlated, the zero-order analysis reported in the text is potentially misleading. A multivariate analysis of these data, however, only confirmed the conclusions advanced in the text on the basis of the zero-order results. Holding all other variables constant, the clearly illicit aspects of a felon's firearms behavior were related only to the Peer Influence Scale.

# The Motivations To Go Armed

Why do felons acquire and carry weapons in the first place? Many previous discussions of this question have tended to depict the behavior as mainly the carrying of instruments of the trade, in short, a view of the felon as a rational economic calculator. Cook's (1976) "strategic choice analysis" of robbery, for example, suggests that robbers carry guns (vs. other weapons or no weapons) because it allows them to rob more lucrative targets and thus to maximize their take. Others suggest that it is more a matter of simple convenience: a gun is a very intimidating weapon, and it is just easier to commit crimes (less resistance from the victim, for example) if one is armed with a gun than if not.

On the other hand, some of the results so far presented point as much to habit as to rational calculation as an important, if not predominant, motive. Earlier, for example, we reported that about 30% of the weapons users in the sample carried weapons almost all of the time, whether planning a crime or not; weapons also enhanced some felons' sense of security, these being the additional 50% who carried weapons in "certain situations," mainly, whenever they felt the need for self-protection. Only about one armed felon in five said that he had carried only when he had been planning to do a crime. From these findings alone, one can safely infer that the crime-facilitative aspects of a weapon did not represent the only, or even the major, motive for carrying one, that habit or fear were of at least equivalent importance.

It would, of course, be mistaken to formulate the issue as one of "rational calculation" or "crime facilitation" versus habit, fear, or "self defense," since in fundamental ways these are false opposites. A felon who carried a gun mainly because he feared encounters with armed victims (and many did, as we see later) could be said to carry out of fear, out of a sensed need for self-defense, or as a means of more efficiently robbing potentially armed victims. In the abstract, these seem like separate classes of motives, but in reality they are inextricably related.

Most of the information we have on the motivations to acquire and carry weapons was obtained by directing pointed questions to respondents according to their special circumstances. Men who indicated early in the questionnaire that they had never committed an armed crime were skipped to a set of questions asking, in essence, Why not? Men who had done gun crime were likewise skipped to a sequence asking about their motives for carrying firearms; men who had done armed crime, but not gun crime, were asked two sequences: why they carried the weapon they carried, and why they chose not to carry a gun instead.[18] Table 13 presents this information.

Table 13

**Weapon Carrying Motivations**

| MOTIVES | IMPORTANCE | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Very | Some-what | A Little | Not At All | $\bar{X}^1$ | (N) |
| Gun Criminals: Why did you carry a gun? | | | | | | |
| 1. Don't have to hurt victim | 57 | 15 | 7 | 21 | 3.1 | (721) |
| 2. Chance victim would be armed | 50 | 12 | 13 | 25 | 2.9 | (712) |
| 3. Prepared for anything... | 48 | 20 | 11 | 20 | 3.0 | (698) |
| 4. ...ready to defend myself | 44 | 14 | 13 | 29 | 2.7 | (709) |
| 5. Easier to do crime... | 42 | 17 | 12 | 29 | 2.7 | (696) |
| 6. Might need gun to escape... | 40 | 15 | 12 | 33 | 2.6 | (695) |
| 7. Need gun to do crime... | 39 | 13 | 12 | 37 | 2.5 | (698) |
| 8. Felt better with gun | 34 | 20 | 17 | 29 | 2.6 | (706) |
| 9. People don't mess with you | 30 | 21 | 14 | 36 | 2.4 | (686) |
| 10. Easy to hurt someone... | 27 | 13 | 13 | 47 | 2.2 | (686) |
| 11. Gun is "tool of trade" | 25 | 16 | 16 | 43 | 2.2 | (690) |
| 12. Police have guns... | 20 | 10 | 12 | 58 | 1.9 | (688) |
| 13. Friends carried guns... | 13 | 11 | 14 | 61 | 1.8 | (702) |
| 14. Made me feel like a man | 4 | 4 | 12 | 80 | 1.3 | (674) |
| Armed - Not With a Gun Criminals: Why did you carry a weapon? | | | | | | |
| 1. Don't have to hurt victim | 39 | 8 | 13 | 39 | 2.5 | (133) |
| 2. Feel better with a weapon | 33 | 12 | 9 | 46 | 2.3 | (133) |
| 3. Ready to defend myself | 30 | 13 | 13 | 45 | 2.3 | (135) |
| 4. Easier to do crime... | 29 | 12 | 10 | 48 | 2.2 | (133) |
| 5. Chance victim would be armed | 27 | 12 | 8 | 53 | 2.1 | (135) |

continued

18. It should be stressed that these data must be treated with some skepticism; people are not always the best witnesses about their own motives, be they felons or "normal" adults. People are not always aware of all the relevant reasons for their own behaviors, and need not always be honest in reporting them even when they are.

We acknowledge in particular the possibility of certain "response set tendencies" in answering the question sequence. It might be easier, that is, for a felon to say, "I needed a gun to protect myself," which sounds defensible if not entirely innocuous, than to say, "I wanted a gun to shoot people with."

On the other hand, readers of previous versions of this report have argued that the more likely effect is in the opposite direction, the hypothesis being that felons would stress (or fabricate) tougher, more aggressive responses so as to project an image of self as fundamentally "bad." Our hope, of course, is that these represent offsetting tendencies. In any case, it is clear that the reasons felons themselves give for why they own and carry guns constitute useful information but do not provide the final word on the matter.

Table 13 continued

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6. Prepared for anything | 24 | 14 | 12 | 50 | 2.1 | (132) |
| 7. Easy to hurt someone | 24 | 6 | 10 | 60 | 1.9 | (135) |
| 8. People don't mess with you | 20 | 11 | 17 | 52 | 2.0 | (133) |
| 9. Might need weapon to escape | 18 | 11 | 10 | 61 | 1.9 | (133) |
| 10. Friends carried weapon | 17 | 11 | 12 | 59 | 1.9 | (138) |
| 11. Weapon's "tool of trade" | 16 | 8 | 9 | 68 | 1.7 | (133) |
| 12. Need weapon to do crime | 11 | 8 | 10 | 71 | 1.6 | (132) |
| 13. Police have weapons... | 10 | 5 | 13 | 72 | 1.5 | (135) |
| 14. Made me feel like a man | 5 | 6 | 7 | 82 | 1.4 | (130) |
| Armed-Not With a Gun Criminals: Why not carry a gun? | | | | | | |
| 1. Just asking for trouble | 56 | 13 | 6 | 25 | 3.0 | (143) |
| 2. Get a stiffer sentence | 54 | 15 | 6 | 25 | 3.0 | (138) |
| 3. Never needed gun for my crimes | 54 | 13 | 9 | 24 | 3.0 | (138) |
| 4. Somebody would get hurt | 49 | 9 | 7 | 35 | 2.7 | (140) |
| 5. Wouldn't feel right | 42 | 7 | 13 | 37 | 2.5 | (137) |
| 6. Never thought about it | 38 | 6 | 16 | 40 | 2.4 | (139) |
| 7. Wouldn't trust myself | 36 | 7 | 7 | 50 | 2.3 | (135) |
| 8. Never owned a gun | 35 | 7 | 12 | 46 | 2.3 | (137) |
| 9. Don't like guns | 30 | 8 | 11 | 50 | 2.2 | (135) |
| 10. Against the law for me to own gun | 25 | 7 | 13 | 56 | 2.0 | (137) |
| 11. Too much trouble to get one | 16 | 5 | 7 | 72 | 1.6 | (134) |
| 12. Costs too much | 11 | 6 | 11 | 72 | 1.6 | (138) |
| 13. Wouldn't know how to use one | 11 | 4 | 8 | 76 | 1.5 | (132) |
| Unarmed Criminals: Why not carry a weapon? | | | | | | |
| 1. Just asking for trouble | 69 | 12 | 5 | 14 | 3.3 | (553) |
| 2. Get a stiffer sentence | 67 | 12 | 6 | 15 | 3.3 | (535) |
| 3. Never needed gun for my crimes | 61 | 7 | 6 | 26 | 3.0 | (523) |
| 4. Somebody would get hurt | 60 | 11 | 7 | 22 | 3.1 | (531) |
| 5. Wouldn't feel right | 53 | 9 | 7 | 31 | 2.8 | (528) |
| 6. Never thought about it | 52 | 9 | 10 | 28 | 2.9 | (537) |
| 7. Against the law | 51 | 8 | 6 | 36 | 2.7 | (513) |
| 8. Don't like weapons | 46 | 11 | 8 | 34 | 2.7 | (517) |
| 9. Never owned a weapon | 38 | 6 | 7 | 48 | 2.3 | (506) |
| 10. Wouldn't trust myself | 34 | 8 | 9 | 50 | 2.3 | (502) |
| 11. Wouldn't know how to use one | 14 | 8 | 7 | 70 | 1.7 | (495) |
| 12. Wouldn't know how to get one | 14 | 6 | 7 | 73 | 1.6 | (499) |
| 13. Too expensive | 12 | 7 | 8 | 73 | 1.6 | (516) |

1. Means were computed with the following rank scores: 4=Very Important; 3=Somewhat Important; 2=A Little Important; 1=Not at All Important.

We focus first on the responses of the "Gun Criminals" (men who had done at least one gun crime). As these men told it, the single most important reason why they decided to carry a gun while doing crime was, "if you carry a gun your victim doesn't put up a fight, and that way you don't have to hurt them" ("very important" to 57% and the most commonly mentioned motive of the fourteen we asked about, by a fairly substantial margin). Likewise, the second most important reason cited was, "There's always a chance my victim would be armed" ("very important" to 50%). It is of considerable interest that both the first and second most important motives relate to victims; half the men who had committed gun crimes said that one "very important" reason to carry a gun during crime was the prospect that the intended victim would be armed.[19]

Intimidation of the victim, and defense against an armed victim, are the only motives of the fourteen we asked about that were said to be very important by half or more of the Gun Criminals portion of the sample. Other motives of nearly equal weight included, "when you have a gun, you are prepared for anything that might happen" ("very important" to 48%), and "a guy like me has to be ready to defend himself" (44%). Self-preservation was clearly the common theme in both these responses.

That "it is easier to do crime if you are armed with a gun" was the fifth (but only the fifth) most commonly cited motive and was rated as "very important" by 42%. This plus the first-place result make it clear that the increased ease with which crime can be committed if armed with a gun was one important motive for carrying one; the other results also suggest, however, that self-preservation was a motive of equivalent importance.[20]

The twin motif of efficiency and self-preservation recurs throughout the results. "I felt I might need a gun to escape" was very important to 40%; "you need a gun to do the kind of crime I did," to 39%. Some men "just felt better when I had a gun with me" (34% very important). That "people just don't mess with you if you are carrying a gun" was very important to 30%. Motives of apparently minimal importance included "a

19. This result is consistent with a suggestion once made by Phillip Cook that many robbers carry guns as a means of avoiding, not perpetrating, violence. It is, however, not consistent with the argument reviewed in the previous footnote, that these felons would exercise every opportunity to tell us just how "bad" they were. "...and that way you don't have to hurt them..." strikes us as an almost sissified response; it was, nonetheless, the most frequent response.

It bears notice that felons of the sort being studied here are not above preying upon their fellow criminals; in this sense, the possibility that their victims would be armed is non-trivial. See below, "Confronting Armed Victims," for additional details.

20. The important point to be made from these results, of course, is not that crime-facilitation is a more or less important motive than self-preservation, but rather that guns are important to felons because they allow for the commission of crimes with a minimum of trouble from victims and a maximum of security for the felon. Whether or not this mixture of motives conforms to some postulated syndrome of economic rationality is more a semantic problem than an empirical one. To be sure, many of the motives cited by these men went well beyond the rational calculus of a profitmaximizing businessman, relating, instead, to survival in an uncertain and dangerous life. At the same time, a man who has decided to maximize his survival chances has obviously made a very rational decision.

lot of the people I hung around with carried guns" (but see the previous discussion), and "carrying a gun made me feel more like a man."

Results for the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun Criminals were similar in some respects but quite different in others. We note first that all the possible motives for carrying weapons were generally less important to the men who carried weapons other than firearms than to the gun criminals. To illustrate, the mean response for the first-place finisher among the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun group was 2.5 (39% "very important"). Among the Gun Criminals, there were six motives with higher mean scores. From this pattern (which is quite general in the data), one infers that the reasons why gun criminals carried guns were generally more strongly held than were the reasons why the men who carried other weapons carried the weapons they did.

As among the gun criminals, the most important reason for carrying a weapon among the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun group was so that the victim would not put up a fight. Indeed, the two groups were agreed on four of the top five motives. Men who carried weapons other than guns, that is, appeared to do so for pretty much the same reasons that gun-carrying felons carried firearms--a combination of efficiency and protection. The difference was mainly that these reasons were less strongly held among the non-gun than among the gun group.

The Armed-Not-with-a-Gun group was also asked why they had opted not to carry firearms; the Unarmed Criminals were asked why they had opted not to carry any weapons. Remarkably, there was virtually perfect agreement between the two groups through the first six motives on the list. In both cases, the most important reason for not carrying was that "the guy who carries a gun or a weapon is just asking for trouble" (very important to 56% of the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun and to 69% of the Unarmed), followed by "you get a stiffer sentence if you get caught with a gun or a weapon" (very important to 54% and 67%, respectively). The other four top finishers in both groups were: "I never needed a gun or a weapon for the kinds of crime I did" (54% and 61% "very important"); "if you carry a gun or a weapon, somebody is going to get hurt" (49% and 60% very important, respectively); "I just wouldn't feel right carrying a gun or a weapon: (42% and 53%); and "I just never thought about carrying a gun or a weapon" (38% and 52%).

Despite the high rank-order agreement of the reasons not to carry, we note again that all the cited reasons were less important, on the average, to the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun Criminals than to the Unarmed Criminals. The highest mean score among the former group was 3.0, and among the latter 3.3; and again, this pattern was quite general throughout all relevant comparisons.

Interestingly, then, it appears that the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun criminals carried weapons for much the same reasons that the Gun Criminals carried guns, but chose not to carry guns for much the same reasons that the Unarmed opted not to carry anything.

Some of the item-specific results warrant more extended comment. First, the strong showing of "you get a stiffer sentence if ..." should be acknowledged. A weapons involvement would have eventuated in a stiffer sentence in many jurisdictions (e.g., Cook and Nagin, 1979); the perception of the sample on this point is no doubt largely accurate. It is impossible to say for sure just how many of the Unarmed or the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun criminals would have been Gun Criminals were it not for this fact; but presumably some, perhaps many, would have been.

On the other hand, that it was "against the law" for most of these men to own a firearm appears to have been a minimal deterrent, especially for the Armed-Not-with-a-Gun group, among whom this finished tenth as a reason not to carry guns. This suggests (as an admittedly remote but interesting inference) that more might be gained in this area through sentencing practices than through legislative action.

Finally, it is of some relevance to note that the decision not to carry had little, if anything, to do with availability, knowledge, or price. The least important of all factors asked about was, "A good gun or weapon just costs too much money;" this factor was said to be not at all important by about three-quarters of both relevant groups. "It is too much trouble to get a gun or weapon" and "I wouldn't know how to use a gun or weapon if I had one" were also not at all important to the large majority. As noted earlier, a substantial majority of the Unarmed Criminals in the sample had in fact owned guns. That these men did not use guns to commit crimes is therefore not the result of inadequate knowledge about or exposure to them.

## The "Seriousness" of Carrying

The pattern of inter-correlations among the fourteen "motivations" questions for the Gun Criminals revealed a notable result: all the coefficients were positive; all were statistically significant; most were respectable in magnitude; and quite a few were substantial (.30 or higher). What this implies is that men who found any of these factors important tended to see each of the others as important too, which may have been a major reason why they were Gun Criminals in the first place.21

The above result suggests that a useful measure of the "seriousness" of gun carrying among the men in the sample can be constructed simply by summing the number of "very important" responses over the fourteen offered options. This, in essence, is a count of the number of "good reasons" a felon gave for why he carried a gun. Over the total Gun Criminals sample, the average number of "very important" responses was 3.6. This average varied sharply across the categories of the typology, from 1.6 "very important" reasons among the One-Timers to 5.2 "very important" reasons among the Handgun Predators. In general, as the frequency of gun use in crime increased, the number of important reasons for carrying a gun also increased. The higher-rate criminals in our sample evidenced a much greater seriousness of purpose in their gun-carrying behaviors than the others.

---

21. Stated differently, most men who were able to cite any important reason for carrying a gun were usually able to cite numerous reasons. Presumably, the more "good reasons" a man has for carrying a gun, the more difficult it will be to persuade him to stop it. In this sense, the uniformly positive correlations among all fourteen "motivation" questions are not encouraging.

## Differences in Motives by Criminal Type

Among the Predators (both types), the single most important reason for carrying a gun was, "When you have a gun, you are prepared for anything that might happen." Among the Handgun Predators, this was followed by the two "victims" responses, and then by self-defense. Other items with mean scores (among Handgun Predators) of 3.0 or higher included the need to escape, that it was easier to do crime when armed with a gun, and that "I just felt better ..." In general, the patterns for the Shotgun Predators were very similar. Relative to responses in the total gun criminals sample, then, these results suggest that the crime facilitative (or "efficiency") factors were somewhat less important, and the survival factors somewhat more important, to the Predators than to the other groups.

Additional evidence on motivations was obtained from all the gun owners in the sample (not just the Gun Criminals), in connection with questions about the reasons why they acquired their most recent firearm(s). These data are shown in Table 14.

Concerning the most recent handgun acquisitions, the predominant motive by far was self-protection: 58% of the handgun owners in the sample cited this as a "very important" reason why the most recent handgun was obtained. No other reason even comes close: the next highest "very important" percentage was for "target shooting" (31%). Remarkably, "to use in my crimes" was cited as a "very important" reason by only 28% of the sample; the proportion citing self-protection was more than twice as large.[22]

Sport and recreational applications (hunting, target shooting, gun collections) were mentioned as important reasons by roughly a quarter of the handgun owners in the sample; specific criminal applications (stole a handgun to sell, needed a handgun to get somebody) were cited less frequently (10-20%), except, of course, general use in crime, which was noted by 28%. Judging from these data, a felon was as likely to acquire a handgun for some sport or recreational purpose as he was to acquire one for a specific criminal use. Many apparently had both sets of purposes in mind, just as a salesman might buy a car for both pleasure and business applications.

Concerning the most recent shoulder weapon acquisition, sport and recreational uses dominated the results. Hunting was cited as very important by 64%, and target shooting by 40%. Following in third place was self-protection, very important to 31%. Specific criminal applications were less commonly cited: still, 17%--nearly one in five--mentioned "to use in my crimes" as a very important reason for their most recent acquisition.

Table 14

**Reasons Why Felons' Most Recent Firearms Were Obtained**

| MOST RECENT HANDGUN | NOT IMPORTANT | SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT | VERY IMPORTANT | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hunting | 54 | 20 | 26 | 736 |
| Target Shooting | 38 | 31 | 31 | 746 |
| Gun Collection | 56 | 19 | 25 | 718 |
| Protection | 16 | 26 | 58 | 819 |
| Just wanted one | 38 | 36 | 26 | 772 |
| To use in crimes | 52 | 20 | 28 | 737 |
| Stole to sell | 65 | 18 | 17 | 715 |
| Needed to get someone | 80 | 10 | 10 | 688 |
| MOST RECENT SHOULDER WEAPON | | | | |
| Hunting | 23 | 14 | 64 | 844 |
| Target Shooting | 30 | 30 | 40 | 778 |
| Gun Collection | 56 | 19 | 26 | 741 |
| Protection | 44 | 25 | 31 | 779 |
| Just wanted one | 43 | 33 | 23 | 765 |
| To use in crimes | 70 | 13 | 17 | 736 |
| Stole to sell | 73 | 13 | 14 | 726 |
| Needed to get someone | 87 | 6 | 7 | 694 |

Felons who owned handguns but did not use them to commit crimes tended predominantly to have been sport and recreational owners. Among the Unarmed Criminals, for example, "target shooting" was, on the average, as important as self-protection as a reason for acquiring the most recent handgun, and the same was more or less equally true of Improvisors and Knife Criminals as well. In all three cases, to be sure, self-protection was as important as (or, in one case, slightly more important than) any of the sport and recreational reasons. On the other hand, it was only among the non-gun criminals where sport and recreational motives competed favorably with the other reasons listed.

Self-protection was a relatively important motive in all seven groups; means varied from 2.1 to 2.6 (out of a possible maximum of three). Among the four groups of Gun Criminals, self-protection was the single most important motive in every case. Even among Handgun Predators, self-protection was more important than any of the specific criminal use applications; the mean response among Handgun Predators on "self-protection" was 2.6, vs. 2.3 on "to use in my crimes." In short, even the more predatory criminals acquired handguns primarily, as they saw it, for their own self-protection, and only secondarily to use in crime. (At the same time, use in crime was clearly more important to the Predators than to any of the other groups.)[23]

22. As suggested earlier, acquiring a handgun specifically for its use in crime was relatively uncommon among the men in this sample. Given the close relationship between the themes of efficiency and self-preservation, the distinction is perhaps a spurious one. Nonetheless, many of the handguns that are used for crime appear to be obtained primarily for self-protection reasons, at least as the felon saw it. Then too, the "self protection" in question may only be protection against the inherent risks that stem from a life a crime. Apparently, most of our felons viewed firearms as general tools serving a variety of purposes, efficiency in crime being one, survival being another. Whatever the realities that underlie these responses, it is clear that "self protection" is an important symbolic rubric for many of these men.

23. That these men inhabit a violent and generally hostile world is easy to demonstrate. Over 70% of them had been involved in assaults; over half had gotten into bar fights; about 40% had been stabbed with a knife; 52% report having been shot at with a gun; a third said they had been "scared off, shot at, wounded or captured" by a victim who was armed with a gun; etc. That they felt some need to "protect" themselves is hardly surprising. (All the above figures are for the total sample. Among the Predators specifically, the numbers are generally higher.)

## Confronting Armed Victims

As we have just seen, among the reasons given for why one might carry a gun during crime was, "there's always a chance my victim would be armed," cited as a very important reason by 50% of the gun criminals. We asked the sample a number of follow-up questions about encountering armed victims, findings from which are reported in this section. We cover two main topics: first, we consider evidence from the survey on whether an encounter with an armed victim is something about which felons worried in the course of committing crimes; and second, how frequently armed victims were encountered during the felons' criminal careers.[24]

Results from the attitudinal questions are shown in Table 15. There is a very consistent pattern to the results; in all cases, the majority opinion was that felons are made nervous by the prospect of an encounter with an armed victim.

The first item in the sequence asked the sample to agree or disagree that "a criminal is not going to mess around with a victim he knows is armed with a gun." About three-fifths of the sample (56%) agreed. Another item read, "A smart criminal always tries to find out if his potential victim is armed." More than four-fifths (81%) agreed with that. Yet another item read, "Most criminals are more worried about meeting an armed victim than they are about running into the police." About three-fifths (57%) also agreed with that.[25]

There were also two direct questions on whether guns thwart crimes. One reads, "One reason burglars avoid houses when people are at home is that they fear being shot during the crime." Three-quarters of the sample (74%) agreed. (Of course, there are other reasons for avoiding occupied homes, such as fear of being reported to the police, about which we did not ask). The other reads, "A store owner who is known to keep a gun on the premises is not going to get robbed very often." About three-fifths (58%) again agreed. The possibility that one's intended victim is armed was evidently a concern to most of these men: the strong majority agreed that it is wise to find out in advance if one's potential victims are armed, and to avoid them if they are.

Table 15

**Attitudes Toward Encountering Armed Victims: Total Sample**

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. A criminal is not going to mess around with a victim he knows is armed with a gun: | 25 | 31 | 35 | 9 | (1628) |
| 2. One reason burglars avoid houses when people are at home is that they fear being shot: | 35 | 39 | 20 | 7 | (1628) |
| 3. Most criminals are more worried about meeting an armed victim than they are about running into the police: | 21 | 36 | 32 | 10 | (1615) |
| 4. A smart criminal always tries to find out if his potential victim is armed: | 30 | 51 | 15 | 4 | (1608) |
| 5. A store owner who is known to keep a gun on the premises is not going to get robbed very often: | 18 | 40 | 32 | 9 | (1645) |
| 6. Committing crime against an armed victim is an exciting challenge: | 10 | 14 | 34 | 42 | (1604) |

24. All the data reported in this section are ambiguous in the sense that we do not know directly just who the armed victims were that our sample reported encountering. One very potent and oft-exploited image of the "armed victim" is that of the hard-bitten, generally law abiding home owner valiantly defending self and family from the incursions of the predatory criminal class. This, for example, is the image one obtains from "The Armed Citizen" column in the NRA's American Rifleman, where accounts of these kinds of incidents are collected and printed. Such incidents doubtlessly occur, perhaps with considerable frequency; national surveys suggest that some 2-6% of the adult US population have at some time actually fired a gun in their own self defense (Wright et al., 1983: Ch. 7).

On the other hand, one must also keep in mind in reviewing our materials on armed victim encounters that felons prey, for the most part, on others much like themselves, and that in many of these encounters, the question, Who is victim and who is perpetrator?, is often a judgment call. That the predatory felons in this sample hung around with other men who owned and carried guns has already been reported; that felons prey on the people they associate with and on others in the immediate environment is confirmed in details in the criminal victimization surveys (see, e.g., Hindelang et al., 1978). Given these points, one would have to expect that the rate at which these men encountered armed victims would be rather high, which, indeed, it is (see text). To emphasize, some of these encounters would involve encounters between perpetrators and total innocents; others--perhaps the larger share--would involve their own friends and associates.

25. There is, to be sure, a considerable degree of realism in this latter response. National surveys conducted periodically since 1959 have routinely found that about half of all US households possess at least one gun, which translates into about 40 million gun owning households. There are, in short, very many more potential "armed victims" to run into than there are police. Consistent with the point, Kleck (1983) has reported that in any given year, more criminals are shot to death in "justifiable homicides" by ordinary civilians than are killed by the police, although the numerical difference is not large.

The attitudinal result in the text is based on a question about "most criminals." We also asked about each felon's personal opinion, that is, whether he personally worried more about armed victims or more about the police. These data suggest that the two possibilities are roughly equivalent classes of concern.

One final question in the sequence was designed to explore the "other side" of this issue, namely, the possibility that "committing crime against an armed victim is an exciting challenge." For about three quarters of the men in this sample, it was not.[26]

All the preceeding items deal with criminals in general; we also asked each man about the kinds of things he personally thought about "when you were getting ready to do a crime." The three things most often on a felon's mind when getting ready to commit crime were, it appears, the possibility of getting caught (cited as something one thought about "regularly" or "often" by 54%), the possibility of going to prison (50%), and the possibility that "your family might look down on you" (48%). Just over a third thought regularly or often about the possibility of getting shot by the police; an identical percentage thought regularly or often about getting shot by one's victim. The possibility of hurting or killing someone was also thought about regularly or often by roughly a third. That one's friends "might look down on you" was a concern to only about a quarter.

It is of some interest to ask, which felons thought most about being shot by their victim in the course of a crime? A major factor appears to be having had the experience of encountering an armed victim at some prior time. We asked the sample in a later question series whether they, personally, had ever "run into a victim who was armed with a gun." Among those who had never had the experience (N = 919), 48% said they "never" thought about being shot by their victim; among those who had (N = 553), only 23% "never" thought about it. Likewise, 45% of those who had at some time confronted an armed victim thought about being shot by their victim regularly or often; among the remainder, the comparable figure was 28%. Here as in many other instances, experience appears to be a capable teacher.

Direct evidence on the sample's experience with armed victim encounters is shown in Table 16. Just under two-fifths of the sample (37%) had at some time in their careers run into a victim who was armed with a gun. A slightly smaller percentage (34%) said they had been "scared off, shot at, wounded, or captured by an armed victim," and about two-thirds (69%) had at least one acquaintance who had had this experience. (A tenth knew "many" criminals who had been thwarted by an armed victim.) About two-fifths of the sample (40%) had at some time decided <u>not</u> to do a crime because they knew or believed that their intended victim was armed.

A cross-tabulation of the first two items reveals that encountering an armed victim is <u>not</u> the same thing as being thwarted by one. About 37% of the sample had run into an armed victim, but a slightly smaller percentage, 34%, said they had been scared off, shot at, or otherwise opposed forcefully by one. The correlation between these two experiences is strong (r = .52) but short of perfect. As it happens, there were 1,049 men in the sample who said they had <u>never</u> "run into a victim who was armed with a gun," and of these, some 15% said they <u>had</u> been scared off, shot at, etc. This appears to be an inconsistency, but may in fact not be. "Run into" might be interpreted to imply a direct face-to-face encounter, and clearly, one could be "scared off," or even "shot at," by a gun-wielding victim and never confront that victim face-to-face.

There were, likewise, 609 men in the sample who <u>had</u> encountered an armed victim. Of these, just two-thirds said they had also been scared off, shot at, etc.; the remaining third had not been. This implies, first, that not all encounters with an armed victim eventuate in a thwarted crime; a third of the men who had ever encountered an armed victim said they had never been deterred by one. But it also implies, secondly, that at least some of these encounters do result in a thwarted crime. Two thirds of the men who had ever encountered an armed victim said they had also been deterred or thwarted by an armed victim at least once. This is, to be sure, very imperfect evidence on the efficacy of private firearms as a defense against crime, but it is at least <u>some</u> evidence that armed citizens abort or prevent at least some crime.

Table 16

**Confronting The Armed Victim: Experiential Results**

1. Thinking now about all the crimes you ever committed...Did you personally ever run into a victim who was armed with a gun?

| | |
|---|---|
| NO | 63 |
| YES | 37 |
| | 100% |

N = (1667)

2. Have you ever been scared off, shot at, wounded or captured by an armed victim?

| | |
|---|---|
| NO | 66 |
| YES | 34 |
| | 100% |

N = (1673)

3. Was there ever a time in your life when you decided not to do a crime because you knew or believed that the victim was carrying a gun?

| | |
|---|---|
| NO, NEVER | 61 |
| YES, JUST ONCE | 10 |
| YES, A FEW TIMES | 22 |
| YES, MANY TIMES | 8 |
| | 101% |

N = (1627)

4. Think now about other criminals you have known in your life...Have any of the criminals you have known personally ever been scared off, shot at, wounded, captured, or killed by an armed victim?

| | |
|---|---|
| NO, NONE | 31 |
| YES, BUT ONLY ONE | 10 |
| YES, A FEW | 48 |
| YES, MANY | 11 |
| | 100% |

N = (1627)

26. On the other hand, fully a quarter of the sample agreed with this sentiment. Some, in short, were apparently not at all nervous about armed victim encounters; to the contrary, the prospect seemed to excite them. Analysis of the responses showed that the tendency to agree with the item was considerably higher among the Predators than among the remainder of the sample; among the two Predator groups, agreement ran to about 40% (vs. about 20% elsewhere). For about two-fifths of the predatory felons, in other words, the thrill of confrontation with an armed victim appears to be part of the positive motivation to commit crime.

That 40% of the sample had at some time decided not to do a crime because the intended victim was carrying a gun is additional evidence favoring the same point.[27]

The four items in Table 14 are fairly strongly correlated one with the other; the correlation coefficients range from .27 to .52. Substantively, this implies that those who had run into an armed victim were also likely to have been deterred or thwarted by one and to have had friends and acquaintances who had had similar experiences.

The correlations among the items are strong enough to justify combining them into a simple summated index of armed victim encounters. Analysis of this index showed that the more crime one has committed, the higher the odds on encountering an armed victim. The least likely ever to have had such an encounter were the Unarmed Criminals; the most likely, by far, were the Predators, especially the Handgun Predators. The probability of an encounter with an armed victim, in other words, appears to be directly proportional to the rate at which crimes were committed. Consistent with this latter point, the correlation between the Encounter Index and our Index of Total Criminality is 31.

One must, of course, be cautious in interpreting all the above results. Many of these men's "victims" are in all likelihood other men much like themselves. The armed victim encounters reported by this sample may well be confrontations between two men with equally felonious histories and motives as between hard core perpetrators and total innocents.

---

27. We can only speculate about the circumstances under which a felon would come to find out that his potential victim was armed and choose not to commit a crime accordingly. Unless a victim were a policeman, a security guard, or carrying his weapon in a very obvious way, it would normally be rather difficult to make the determination, most of all in committing a conventional crime (robbery, burglary, assault) against a conventional victim.

From the above one infers that knowledge about a victim's armament would generally be highest when the "victims" are one's friends and neighbors or persons with whom one has frequent dealings. Hence, a felon might well decide not to rob his drug dealer when he knows his dealer carries a weapon at all times, might decide not to hijack the loot from a fellow thief known to be well-armed, etc. Indeed, it could be argued that the process that results in these men saying that they have been thwarted in at least one crime by an armed victim is merely the opposite side of the self-protection theme about which the prisoners made much as a motive for carrying guns.

Our point here is that it is not at all clear what these men were saying when they told us they had decided at least once not to do a crime because they knew or suspected that the victim was armed. This might involve a street robbery that was not attempted because of a suspicious bulge under the victim's jacket, or it might involve a home burglary thwarted in progress because the victim opened fire, or it might involve nothing more than a general tendency to avoid victimizing other thugs who are known to carry weapons. In all likelihood, it involves a combination of these, but nothing in our data would allow a determination of the relative frequencies.

# What Felons Look for in Firearms

What do felons look for in a handgun? What characteristics are important to them? What kinds of handguns do they actually own and carry?

It is often assumed that criminals prefer small, cheap handguns, the so-called Saturday Night Specials (SNS), or, the currently preferred phrase, the "snubbies," the light-weight, short-barrelled, typically smaller-caliber weapons that are easily obtained, readily concealable, and serve the purpose of intimidation as well as any other.

Typically, this preference has been inferred from studies of confiscated weapons. In the well-known ATF Project Identification study, to illustrate, half the handguns in the sample were judged to be worth less than $50, 70% had barrel lengths of 3 inches or less, and 60% were .32 caliber or less; all told, 45% were deemed to be "Saturday Night Specials." Brill's (1977) analysis suggested a somewhat, but not dramatically, lower fraction of SNS's among the handguns used in crime. (Of course, Project Identification's handgun prices were obtained in the early 70's, and since that time inflation has raised the prices of all goods by as much as 125%; thus a handgun that sold for $50 then would now sell for about $112.)

To assess the traits that our felons looked for in a handgun, every man in the sample (whether a gun owner or not) was given a list of handgun characteristics (e.g., "that it is cheap," "that it is big caliber," etc.) and was asked to state how important each characteristic "would be to you in looking for a suitable handgun." In all, thirteen handgun traits were used for this analysis; each man was also asked to pick from the list of thirteen the single most important factor he "would look for in a handgun."

Judging first from the fraction rating each trait as "very important," the three most desirable handgun characteristics were accuracy (62% rating this as very important), untraceability (60%), and the quality of the construction (that it was "a well-made gun," 58%). That it was "easy to shoot" was very important to 54%; that it was "easily concealed" was very important to 50%. "Easy to get" and "has a lot of firepower" were also relatively important (48% and 42%, respectively). In contrast, the characteristics usually associated with criminal handguns did not seem particularly important to these men: "that it is cheap" was very important to only 21%; "that it is small caliber," to only 11%. These data clearly do not suggest a strong preference for SNS-style handguns.

Results for the "single most important" question were generally similar: based on these results, the ideal handgun from the felon's viewpoint was one that had a lot of firepower (22%), was well-made (17%), could not be traced (13%), and was easily concealed (13%). Price, in contrast, was the single most important factor to only 6%; small caliber, to only 3%. In both cases, the importance of concealability was apparent, but beyond that, the traits characteristic of heavier-duty handguns seemed far more important to these men than did the traits of snubbies or the Saturday Night Specials.

The thirteen handgun traits asked about in the sequence can be roughly grouped into four categories for purposes of data reduction. First are the traits that, for our purposes, define the Saturday Night Special: cheap and small caliber. Second are the traits that, for want of a better term, we will refer to as the "serious handgun" traits: accuracy, firepower, big caliber, well-made gun. Third are a set of three traits that would normally matter only to a felon who intended to use the handgun for criminal or illicit purposes--that it is concealable, a scary looking gun, and cannot be traced--to which we will refer as the "criminal use" traits. Finally, there are four "convenience" traits--easy to shoot, easy to get, ammunition is cheap, ammunition is easy to get--which might be of some importance to a handgun consumer regardless of the intended use.

Table 17

**Relative Importance of Four Categories of Handgun Characteristics**

| IMPORTANCE | CHARACTERISTICS | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SNS[1] | Serious[2] | Criminal[3] | Convenience[4] |
| Not At All Important | 40 | 13 | 14 | 15 |
| A Little Important | 37 | 25 | 27 | 32 |
| Somewhat Important | 17 | 42 | 47 | 40 |
| Very Important | 6 | 20 | 12 | 13 |
| % = | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| $\bar{X}$[5] | 2.1 | 3.0 | 2.8 | 2.8 |
| SD = | .91 | .88 | .85 | .83 |
| N = | 1356 | 1317 | 1374 | 1346 |

CORRELATIONS

| | SNS[1] | SERIOUS[2] | CRIMINAL[3] | CONVENIENCE[4] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SNS | -- | | | |
| SERIOUS | .09 | -- | | |
| CRIMINAL | .39 | .35 | -- | |
| CONVENIENCE | .47 | .48 | .58 | -- |

1. SNS = "Saturday Night Special" Traits: cheap; small caliber.
2. Serious = "Serious Handgun" Traits: accuracy; firepower; big caliber; well-made.
3. Criminal = "Criminal Use" Traits: concealable; scary-looking; untraceable.
4. Convenience = "Convenience" Traits: easy to shoot; easy to get; cheap ammunition; ammunition easy to get.
5. Mean Rankings are computed using the following scores: 1 = Not At All Important; 2 = A Little Important; 3 = Somewhat Important; and 4 = Very Important.

Scaling consisted simply of summing responses to the component variables. To reduce all four variables to a common metric, the resulting sum was divided by the number of component items; each scaled variable therefore ranged from 1 (all component traits said to be "not at all important") to 4 (all component traits said to be "very important"). Distributions, means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations for the resulting variables are reported in Table 17.

The distributions on these variables suggest rather strongly that the "serious handgun" traits taken as a whole were the most important factors felons looked for in a handgun. The mean on the "serious handgun" factor was 3.0, clearly the highest of the four means; 62% of the sample scored 3 or higher on the "serious handgun" variable (somewhat or very important); relatively few men (about 13%) considered the "serious handgun" traits to be generally unimportant.

Next in importance were the criminal use and convenience traits, with means of 2.8 in both cases. By far the least important were the Saturday Night Special traits: the mean for this variable was 2.1, and only 23% of the sample regarded these traits as very or somewhat important to look for in a handgun.

With one exception, the inter-correlations among these four variables were positive and strong. (The exception was a substantively trivial correlation of .09 between the SNS and serious handgun traits.) The criminal use and convenience traits were both correlated at about the same level with the SNS and serious handgun traits; or in other words, the convenience and criminal use traits were about equally important to men who preferred SNS-style handguns and to those who preferred the heavier-duty equipment. We note finally that the strongest correlate of the criminal use traits was the convenience traits (r = .58): men who valued a handgun for its suitability for use in crime also tended strongly to value guns that were easy to obtain and fire, and for which ammunition was cheap and readily obtained.

Table 18

**Handgun Characteristics Preferences by Gun Ownership and Criminal Type**

| | CHARACTERISTICS[1] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ever Owned a Gun? | SNS | SERIOUS | CRIMINAL | CONVENIENCE |
| NO | 2.3* | 2.7* | 2.8 | 2.8 |
| YES | 2.0 | 3.1 | 2.8 | 2.8 |
| IF YES: Own Handgun? | | | | |
| NO | 2.1 | 2.9 | 2.6* | 2.8 |
| YES | 2.0 | 3.1 | 2.8 | 2.8 |
| CRIMINAL TYPE | | | | |
| Unarmed | 2.2 | 2.9 | 2.7 | 2.8 |
| Improvisor | 2.1 | 3.1 | 2.7 | 2.7 |
| Knife | 2.2 | 3.0 | 2.8 | 3.0 |
| One-Time | 2.0 | 2.9 | 2.7 | 2.8 |
| Sporadic | 2.1 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 2.9 |
| HG Predator | 1.9 | 3.3 | 2.9 | 2.9 |
| SG Predator | 1.9 | 3.2 | 2.9 | 2.8 |
| F ratio = | 4.54 | 7.32 | 5.03 | 1.79 |
| probability = | .000 | .000 | .000 | .097 |

* The difference between owners and nonowners is statistically significant ($p < .01$).

1. See Table 17 for definitions of the four handgun characteristics.

Table 18 shows the relationship between the "handgun traits" preferences and the gun ownership variables (ever own a gun? ever own a handgun?). The relationship to the armed criminals typology is also shown.

Concerning the gun ownership variables, only three of the eight mean comparisons were statistically significant: men who had never owned a gun tended to value the SNS traits more highly than men who had; likewise, the non-owners tended to value the serious handgun traits less highly than the gun owners did. Finally, men who had owned a handgun valued the criminal use traits more highly than gun owners who had not owned handguns.

Substantively, perhaps the most interesting result reported here is that the preference of felons for SNS-style handguns was concentrated disproportionately among felons who had never even owned a gun; among gun owning felons, the importance of the SNS traits was even less than suggested earlier.[28]

The relationship of the preference variables with the criminal typology proved instructive. The preference for SNS characteristics was generally highest among the non-gun-using criminals, especially among the Unarmed and Knife Criminals, and lowest among the Predator categories. Likewise, preference for the serious handgun traits was lowest among the non-users and highest among the Predators, as was the preference for the criminal use traits. (The relationship of the convenience factor to type was not statistically significant.) In short, serious criminals preferred serious equipment.

The preceding describes the characteristics of the "ideal handgun" from the criminal viewpoint. It is a useful question whether the traits they preferred in a handgun were to be found among the handguns they actually carried.

To this end, each handgun owner in the sample was asked a series of questions about the most recent handgun he had owned: approximate retail value, manufacturer, caliber, and barrel length. The apparent preference for serious equipment suggested above is amply evident in the handguns these men actually owned. On the whole, these were relatively expensive handguns: only about 11% were judged to be worth $50 or less, and just under a third (31%) were judged to

28. It is worth a note that all five of the "firearms socialization" variables were negatively related to the SNS preference and positively related to the "serious handguns" preference. The greater a felon's early exposure to firearms, the stronger his preference for serious handguns. It can also be mentioned that there was no correlation between having obtained one's most recent handgun "to use in my crimes" and the SNS preference (r = .02).

be worth $100 or less. Most of these handguns (37%) fell into the $100-200 range; about a third (32%) were worth more than $200. Consistent with the price data, about three fifths of these handguns (57%) were manufactured by Smith and Wesson, Colt, or Ruger Arms, all three manufacturers of quality handguns. (To be sure, a sizable fraction of the respondents, 30%, did not know the manufacturer of their most recent handgun.)

Data on caliber and barrel length sustain the same conclusion. Less than a third (30%) of the sample's most recent handguns had barrel lengths of 3 inches or less; most (53%) were standard-sized handguns of the sort normally carried, say, by policemen (4-6 inch barrels); a considerable number (17%) were large handguns of the "Dirty Harry" type (7 inch or longer barrels).

The data on caliber are especially informative, mainly because roughly comparable data for non-felon handguns exist (Wright et al., 1983: 43). Relative to these data, the handguns carried by our felons were predominantly large, not small, caliber; the differences, moreover, are fairly substantial. More than a third (34%) of all handguns manufactured in the United States in 1973-74 were of the .22 caliber variety. In contrast, only about a sixth of the felons' most recent handguns were .22's. All told, just over half (53%) of all non-felon handguns qualify as small caliber weapons (.32 caliber or less); less than a third of the felons (30%) owned handguns of these calibers. Relative to the totals, felons were considerably more likely to carry .357's (20% vs. 13% in the total), .44's (6% to 2%), .45's (8% to 3%), and 9 mm. firearms (7% to 2%).[29]

Neither barrel length nor caliber per se is sufficient to isolate the true SNS's in this sample of handguns. Some short-barrel weapons are chambered in large calibers; some small caliber weapons are not short-barreled. If, following Project Identification, we define an SNS as being both short-barreled and small caliber, then 125 of the most recent handguns owned by these men were Saturday Night Specials, which amounts to 14%. This, moreover, is certainly an overestimate of the true SNS percentage, since at least some of the short, small-caliber weapons would not have been especially cheap.

In sum, these data are not consistent with the argument that felons prefer small, cheap, SNS-style handguns. The stated preferences of the sample, and the equipment they actually carried, suggest, in contrast, a marked preference for larger and better made guns.

---

29. Again, these comparisons are not precise. The data for "all handguns" are the calibers of all handguns manufactured in the US in 1973-74 (the latest year for which these data are available, so far as we know). Thus, imported handguns are not included. It is usually assumed that imported handguns are predominantly of the smaller caliber types; if so, then the differences reported in the text understate the true differences.

The prevalence of 9 mm. handguns in these data is worthy of note. We have remarked elsewhere on the growing popularity of the 9 mm. semi-automatic among the police (Wright et al., 1983: Ch. 4); judging from the data reported in the text, this weapon is also enjoying an increasing popularity among criminal consumers as well. (In any case, very few 9 mm. weapons appear in Brill's 1977 data.) Based on the stated manufacturer, we infer that many of these are the Browning 9 mm. 13 round autoloaders that have been characterized as "the handweapon of choice among terrorists world-wide."

There is an obvious and rather large disparity between our findings and the results of the confiscation studies. For example, about 70% of the Project Identification handguns had barrel lengths of 3 inches or less in contrast to only about 30% in our data; 60% of the Project Identification handguns were of the smaller calibers as compared with only about 30% in our data; and so forth.

We doubt whether there is any one single reason that accounts for the divergence in these results. Our data are possibly misleading on at least four counts: (i) It is possible that our sample exaggerated the size, worth and caliber of their handguns, perhaps to impart a "macho" image. (ii) Seven of the ten states in our study are either clearly or arguably Southern or Western states (clearly: Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and Florida; arguably: Oklahoma, Missouri, and Maryland). It is possible that felons in Southern and Western states have handgun preferences that differ from the preferences of felons elsewhere in the country. (iii) Our data refer only to the felons' most recent handguns; assuming multiple handguns among the felons' arsenals, they may not have carried, day to day, these "most recent" handguns but rather other, smaller handguns acquired at some earlier time. (iv) Finally, our data cannot pretend to be representative of all criminals; the sample is biased in favor of persons with longer and more violent careers in crime. If, as seems likely, one-time, less violent, and/or juvenile offenders prefer smaller armament than our more "serious" felons prefer, then the Project Identification findings (and others like them) may well be more accurate as a depiction of the "typical" crime handgun.

On the other hand, there are also good reasons to be skeptical of the confiscation studies; Brill (1977) provides the best discussion of these problems. Lacking any way to confirm the source of the disparity, we have no choice but to stick with the substantive conclusion suggested by our data: the men we interviewed in these ten prisons tended both to prefer and to own larger and higher-quality handguns than previous studies led us to expect.

The zero-order correlations between the characteristics these men said they preferred in a handgun and the characteristics of the handguns they actually carried were in the right direction but were not very strong. The SNS-traits preference was negatively correlated with the approximate retail value of the felon's most recent handgun ($r = -.16$), with caliber (recoded so that .22's, .25's, and .32's are small caliber and everything else is large, $r = -.09$), and with barrel length ($r = -.07$); and in contrast, the "serious handgun" preference was positively correlated with value ($r = .23$), with caliber ($r = .22$), and with barrel length ($r = .17$).

One reason why these correlations are not higher, of course, was that many of these "most recent" handguns had been stolen by the felon. As we see later, felons stole handguns because they were there to steal, not because they were looking specifically for a firearm; for any given stolen handgun, then, one would expect no more than a random "fit" between desiderata and actual characteristics.

If one omits handguns stolen by the felon himself from the analysis, then the correlations between preferred and actual handgun characteristics go up: absent the

stolen handguns, the SNS-traits preference was negatively correlated with retail value (-.22), caliber (-.11) and with barrel length (-.13); and likewise, the "serious handgun" preference was positively correlated with value (.27), caliber (.24), and barrel length (.21).

Although these correlations are still rather modest, the general tendency is clear enough: the criminals in our sample tended actually to carry what they preferred to carry, which for the most part meant fairly heavy duty handguns, in sharp contrast to the conventional expectation.[30]

---

30. The questionnaire included two measures of "consumer sophistication." One was an eight-item true-false test of knowledge about guns; the second, a seven-item true-false test concerning gun laws. In both cases, the average score was close to the chance expectation, which suggests that felons in general are not especially well-informed about firearms and firearms laws. About three-quarters did know, however, that it was against the law for a convicted felon to obtain a handgun. Relative degrees of consumer sophistication were as much as one would expect: the more firearms a felon had ever owned and the greater his early socialization to firearms, the higher his knowledgeability. Interestingly, the Handgun Predators knew more about guns (but not gun laws) than any other group. Finally, the greater the felon's knowledgeability, the greater his preference for the "serious handgun" traits. In contrast, the preference for small cheap handguns was strongest among those who knew the least about guns.

# Patterns of Firearms Acquisition

## Means and Sources of Acquisition

How and where do felons obtain their firearms? Surprisingly, little is known about this question. It has long been suspected that many felons obtain their guns through theft, a suspicion that is strongly confirmed in our data. It is also commonly assumed, but has never been thoroughly researched, that many felons exploit informal, black market, and other relatively hard-to-regulate sources of supply. This too is confirmed in the analyses reported below.

Burr's (1977) study of Florida felons represents, so far as we know, the only previous attempt to explore patterns of criminal gun acquisition by direct questioning of a felon sample. Data were gathered on the sources from which 176 crime handguns were obtained. Just over a third were acquired through private party transactions (purchases or swaps between private individuals), and about a quarter were obtained through theft. Another quarter were obtained through a retail dealer; a few were obtained as gifts (5%), through pawn shops (2%) or had simply been borrowed (4%). Taking "retail dealer" and "pawn shop" as customary retail transactions where there might be some concern with legality, and the remainder as informal, off-the-record transactions, the latter predominate in these data by about three to one (74% to 26%).[31]

We attempted to obtain fairly comprehensive information from our sample as to where and how they had obtained their guns. Since our respondents tended to have owned guns in fairly large numbers, it was impractical to ask where and how they had obtained every gun they had ever owned. Thus, all our questions refer specifically to their most recent firearms acquisitions. Absent any evidence to suggest otherwise, we assume that patterns of acquisition for these "most recent" guns were typical of all the firearms transactions these men undertook.

Each man in the study was asked whether he had ever owned a handgun; 1,032 said yes. This amounts to 55% of the total sample and to 79% of those who had ever owned any kind of gun. Each of the handgun owners was asked where and how his most recent handgun had been obtained (Table 19).

Concerning "how," outright cash purchase was the most common means of acquiring a handgun, indicated by about 43%. The only other fairly common means of acquisition was theft, indicated by 32%. Small but roughly equal proportions obtained their most recent handgun as gifts (8%), by borrowing (8%), or through trades (7%).

Table 19

**Means and Sources of Handgun Acquisitions**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Means | | |
| | Theft | 32 |
| | Rent/Borrow | 9 |
| | Trade | 7 |
| | Purchase | 43 |
| | Gift | 8 |
| | % = | 99% |
| | N = | 970 |
| Sources | | |
| | Family/Friends | 44 |
| | Black Market | 26 |
| | Retail Outlet | 21 |
| | All Other | 9 |
| | % = | 100% |
| | N = | 943 |

Concerning "where," the most important source was clearly friends, mentioned by 40%. "Off the street" was a distant second, mentioned by 14%, followed by gun shops, which were mentioned by 11%. Other sources of at least some importance included pawnshops (6%), fences (5%), and family members and drug dealers (4% each).[32]

Combining categories in obvious ways, we find that family and friends were by far the most common source for the felons' most recent handguns (44%), followed by various gray and black market sources (fences, drug dealers, off the street, etc., with 26%), followed finally by customary retail outlets (gun shops, pawn shops, hardware and department stores, with 21%). The remaining 10% were acquired from a variety of other sources.

The crosstabulation of the "where" and "how" questions is shown in Table 20. We note first that family and friends were the predominant source of supply whatever the means of acquisition, including theft. Indeed, among those who had obtained their most recent handgun by stealing it, 31% reported stealing from friends or family members. Another 30% reported stealing from a gray or black market source (fence, drug dealer, etc.) About a tenth of the thefts were directly from retail outlets, and the remaining 29% were from "other sources" (in this case, overwhelmingly, from homes and apartments). Additional detail on the theft of firearms is reported later.

31. Burr also surveyed a sample of non-criminal gun owners. Patterns of acquisition differed in degree, but not in kind, from those observed in his sample of felons. Of the 433 legitimate handguns in this analysis, 43% were purchased from a retail dealer and 6% were bought at a pawnshop; thus, only about half of the legitimate handguns were acquired through customary retail channels. Nationally representative data from a 1978 survey of gun owners showed largely the same results (Wright et al., 1983: 118-119). Thus, informal mechanisms of circulation figure quite prominently in both the licit and illict firearms markets.

32. We asked parallel questions about the sample's most recent rifle and shotgun acquisitions as well. Gifts of rifles and shotguns were more numerous than gifts of handguns; likewise, customary retail outlets figure somewhat more prominently in the case of shoulder weapons than in the case of handguns. Otherwise the patterns were quite similar.

Table 20

**Means by Sources of Handgun Acquisitions**

| SOURCE | TOTAL % of Total | PURCHASE % of Col. | PURCHASE % of Total | THEFT % of Col. | THEFT % of Total | BORROW/ RENT % of Col. | BORROW/ RENT % of Total | TRADE % of Col. | TRADE % of Total | GIFT % of Col. | GIFT % of Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Family, Friends | 44 | 38 | 17 | 31 | 10 | 85 | 8 | 54 | 4 | 79 | 6 |
| Gray or Black Mkt.[1] | 26 | 26 | 11 | 30 | 10 | 10 | 1 | 41 | 3 | 15 | 1 |
| Retail Outlet[2] | 20 | 35 | 16 | 10 | 3 | 2 | -- | 3 | -- | 6 | -- |
| All Other | 10 | 1 | 1 | 29 | 9 | 3 | -- | 2 | -- | -- | -- |
| Total % | 100 | 100 | 44[3] | 100 | 32 | 100 | 9 | 100 | 7 | 100 | 8[3] |
| (Total N) | (939) | (415) | | (297) | | (82) | | (70) | | (75) | |

1. Fence, off the street, drug dealer, or black market.
2. Gun shop, pawnshop, hardware, or department store.
3. Individual "source" percents do not sum to total column percent, due to rounding.

Concerning outright cash purchases, family and friends were again the predominant source of supply (38%), followed by customary retail outlets (35%). The black market also received a sizable share of the cash purchase market, in this case 26%.

Table 20 allows us to answer an important question, namely, what fraction of felons' most recent handgun acquisitions involved a straightforward transaction (cash purchase) with a conventional retail outlet? As it happens, this describes 147 of the 939 men represented in the table, or 16%. One out of six of the men in this sample acquired his most recent handgun through means and sources likely to be concerned about the legality of the transaction; five out of six did not.

As one might anticipate, there were fairly sizable differences in the means and sources of handgun acquisitions across the categories of our typology. In the less predatory categories, cash purchase was clearly the most common means of acquisition, and in the more predatory categories, it was theft. One-timers and Sporadics were noticeably more likely to have borrowed (or rented) their most recent handguns than were the other types; knife criminals, noticeably more likely to have received their weapons as gifts.

Concerning sources: family and friends were the major suppliers in all cases but one; among Shotgun Predators, black market sources were slightly more common. Normal retail outlets were exploited by about a third of the Unarmed Criminals and the Improvisors, and by about a fifth or less of everyone else. Fractions who obtained their most recent handgun through purchase from a normal retail outlet varied from 30% of the Unarmed Criminals to 7% of the Handgun Predators. Thus, felons in general avoided usual retail outlets, and the more predatory felons were especially likely to do so.

The presence of sizable numbers of handgun owners in all categories of the typology presents a convenient occasion in which to stress that not all of the handguns acquired by these men were in fact crime guns; what we have said so far pertains to the acquisition of guns by criminals in general, and not specifically the acquisition of guns to use in crime. We can, however, provide at least some data on this latter topic as well.

Men who indicated that they owned a handgun were asked about the reasons why they had acquired it. One of the options was, "to use in my crimes." As it happens, just over half the men who answered this question sequence said that use in crime was not at all important; 20% indicated that it was "somewhat important," and 29% said that it was very important. The crosstabulation of this item with the questions on where and how handguns were obtained is shown in Table 21.

Handguns acquired by felons for reasons other than use in crime tended to be outright cash purchases (50%), typically from family and friends (45%); handguns acquired specifically to use in crime tended instead to be stolen. All told, about 20% of the non-criminal acquisitions involved cash purchase from a usual retail outlet vs. about 7% of the acquisitions where use

Table 21

**Means and Sources of Handgun Acquisitions by Motives for Obtaining a Handgun**

| | "To Use In Crime" Was: | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| How Obtained | Very Important | Somewhat Important | Not Important |
| Theft | 43 | 49 | 24 |
| Rent/Borrow | 14 | 9 | 6 |
| Trade | 6 | 6 | 9 |
| Purchase | 32 | 29 | 50 |
| Gift | 5 | 8 | 11 |
| % = | 100% | 101% | 100% |
| N = | 208 | 146 | 374 |
| Where Obtained | | | |
| Family/Friends | 43 | 49 | 45 |
| Black Market | 32 | 27 | 22 |
| Retail Outlet | 12 | 12 | 24 |
| All Other | 13 | 13 | 9 |
| % = | 100% | 101% | 100% |
| N = | 204 | 142 | 359 |
| % Cash Purchase From Retail Outlet | 7% | 7% | 20% |

in crime was somewhat or very important. Thus, our essential point remains: more predatory criminals, acquiring a handgun specifically for use in crime, heavily exploited informal, off-the-record means and sources and rarely went through customary retail channels.

The survey contains some additional descriptive details about the nature of the criminal handgun market. Given what has already been said, it comes as no surprise to learn that the market was dominated by used vs. new equipment: among those who answered the question, nearly two thirds (65%) reported that their most recent handgun was used when they obtained it. Used guns were somewhat more prominent when use in crime was a major or secondary motive for the acquisition than when it was not; new handguns were reported disproportionately by the Unarmed relative to the more predatory groups.

The illicit firearms market was also predominantly a local market: more than three quarters of the sample (77%) reported that they had obtained their most recent handgun in-state. In general, there were no important differences in this fraction according to type, or according to the motive for acquisition, or by State.

We also asked these men how long it took them to actually get their most recent handgun once they had decided to do so; overwhelmingly, the answer was, "almost immediately." About 60% obtained it within a few hours, and about three quarters of them, within the day. Only about a tenth reported that it took more than a few days.[33]

## Gun Theft

As we have just seen, a major source of the firearms owned and used by our sample was theft, the means by which 32% acquired their most recent handguns. We asked a fairly extensive series of questions concerning the theft of firearms, results from which are presented in this section.

Estimates of the percentage of stolen guns among the firearms used in crime vary widely. The lowest estimate that appears in the literature is 6%, this figure having been derived from the well-known Project Identification study. The opinion of Brill and most other observers is that this is almost certainly an under-estimate, quite probably a severe one. The follow-up study, Project 300, is also based on a sample of confiscated guns but results in a more credible estimate of 22%. Brill's best estimate is about 19-20% (1977: 103); this too is based on a sample of confiscations.

Another approach to the problem is to ask felons themselves whether they stole their gun(s), as, indeed, we have done in our study. So far as we know, the only previous survey of felons to include such a question is Burr's. Among the 176 handguns owned by Burr's sample of felons, 23% were listed as stolen firearms by the felons themselves, roughly in the same range as the estimates based on confiscation samples.

Somewhat in contrast to these findings, all the handgun owners in our sample were asked, "Which of the following best describes how you got your most recent handgun?" Results were reported earlier: about a third (32%) said that they personally had stolen it, a higher figure than reported in previous studies.

The one-third estimate, moreover, is obviously an under-estimate of the true fraction of stolen guns among the guns used in crime, since a stolen gun need not have been stolen by the felon himself. Many of these men, knowingly or unknowingly, will have bought, traded for, or otherwise obtained a handgun that had been stolen by someone else.

To tap what can be called the secondary market in stolen guns, all the handgun owners in the sample were asked, "To the best of your knowledge, was your most recent handgun a stolen weapon?" Men who had personally stolen the gun were instructed to circle "definitely stolen" in response to this question, but not all of them did. If we treat every handgun that was reported to have been personally stolen (32%) as a "definitely" stolen weapon, then, all told, 46% of the most recent handguns possessed by this sample were reported as "definitely stolen" either personally or by someone else and another 24% were "probably stolen." Thus, at least two-fifths, and possibly as many as seven-tenths of the most recent handguns owned by this sample were stolen weapons. These data clearly imply that stolen handguns are a much more important source of supply to the criminal population than has been suggested in any previous study.[34]

Corroborating evidence on the extent of firearms theft among the sample was obtained in the criminal history section of the survey. All respondents were asked, "During any of the crimes you ever committed in your life, did you ever steal a gun?" Of those who responded (N = 1678), 47% said yes; among those who had ever stolen a gun (N = 790), 86% reported having stolen more than one of them.

The tendency to have ever stolen a gun was related, although not perfectly, to the tendency to have used guns to commit crimes. About a quarter of the Unarmed Criminals reported having stolen at least one gun; of this quarter, a third reported having stolen more than

33. Phil Cook (private communication) has pointed out to us that many of these men would presumably have "decided" to obtain their most recent handgun the moment they were offered one on the street or found one in the dresser drawer of a home they were burglarizing. In such cases, clearly, the "how long did it take" question is without meaning.

34. Again, there is a large disparity between our results and those reported from the confiscation studies. In this case, we think the most serious problem is simply that in order for a handgun to show up as "stolen" in a weapon trace, its theft must have been reported to the police, complete with the correct serial number and description. No one knows for sure what fraction of all stolen guns are reported to the police; the number is assuredly less than 100% and may be very much less than 100%. (Certainly, the handguns these men said they stole from fences and drug dealers were not reported!) If half of all stolen guns are in fact reported, then the estimates from the confiscation studies would have to be multiplied by two; if only a third are reported, the estimates would have to be multiplied by three; etc. Taking both our finding (40-70% stolen) and the finding from the confiscation studies (20% stolen) as equally credible, the implication is that the fraction of stolen guns reported to the police lies somewhere between 30-50%, which strikes us as plausible.

ten guns. Among the Improvisors, 45% had stolen a gun; among the Knife Criminals, 34%; and among the One-Timers, 35%. Thus, among the less predatory felon categories, fractions ranging from about a quarter to about a half had stolen at least one firearm.

The remaining categories stand in sharp contrast; among the Sporadics and Predators, it is the rare man who had not stolen a firearm sometime in his life. Indeed, in these categories, the fraction who had ever stolen runs from 70% to 80%. These, moreover, tend to be high rate thieves: among the Sporadics and Predators who had stolen at least one gun (N = 472), a mere 5% had stolen only one.

Response categories to the "how many ever stolen" question were just one, a few, 10-15, dozens, hundreds, or thousands. Taking "a few" to mean five and "dozens" to mean twenty-five, and using the lower limits to all the other categories, we estimate that the gun thieves in our sample had stolen some 30,000 guns in their careers, an average of about 39 stolen weapons per thief. This average, of course, is greatly inflated by the small number of men who report thousands of thefts; the median value would be substantially lower. Still, it is clear that at least some of these men had stolen guns in very large numbers.

About 13% of the sample of gun thieves reported having stolen a single gun, most of them in the less predatory categories. These "one-time" thieves accounted for less than one percent of the total number of guns stolen. Of vastly greater concern are the 85 men--11% of the gun thieves--who reported stealing hundreds or thousands of guns; these men accounted for nearly 80% of the total volume of stolen guns reported by our respondents. About three-quarters of these "high rate" gun thieves were from the two Predator categories.

Men who reported having stolen a gun were asked, "Have you ever gone out specifically looking for a gun to steal, or did you just steal guns when you came across them?" More than three-quarters (76%) of the gun thieves stole guns when they came across them; thus, going out looking specifically for a gun to steal was a relatively rare behavior. Likewise, we asked, "When you stole a firearm, was it usually because you wanted it for yourself, or was it usually because you intended to sell or trade it to somebody else?" More than two thirds (70%) of the gun thieves "usually" stole guns to sell or trade to someone else. Clearly, most gun thefts were "opportunity" crimes: guns were stolen mainly because they were there to steal, not because the felon had decided he needed a gun and that theft was the most convenient or cheapest way to obtain it.

To be sure, a minority of the gun thefts were rather more purposive in character; these "more purposive" gun thefts were concentrated among the Predator categories. More than a third of the Handgun Predators (34%), and two-fifths of the Shotgun Predators (41%), reported having looked specifically for a gun to steal--higher percentages than obtained in any of the other categories. The Handgun Predators were also the likeliest, by far, to steal guns to keep for themselves (45% vs. 30% in the total sample of gun thieves). Still, even in the Predator categories, opportunity theft was the rule: looking specifically to steal a gun for one's own personal use was the minority tendency in every category.

The cross-tabulation of these two questions isolated an interesting subgroup, namely, 100 men who reported that they looked specifically for guns to steal and that they usually stole guns to sell or trade to others. In some sense, these are men who appeared to specialize in gun theft, and so some additional analysis of them is in order.

First, these 100 "professional" gun thieves stole guns in larger than average numbers: their average number of guns ever stolen was 84, or more than twice the average for all gun thieves. Relative to the others, they were also distinctively more likely to steal from high quantity sources. Among the total sample of gun thieves, for example, 8% said they had stolen guns directly from a manufacturer; among the 100 "professionals," this was true of 15%. They were also more likely to steal from a shipment (29% vs. 16% in the total) and from stores (50% vs. 37%). They were also more likely than the others to have stolen a gun from a policeman or "directly off a person." However, gun theft during housebreaks was no more common among the "professionals" than among the total sample.

The "professionals" also differed in how they disposed of the guns they stole. Most sold to fences (64% vs. 49% in the total sample of gun thieves); a surprisingly large number sold stolen firearms to gun dealers (32%, vs. 21% in the total sample). Perhaps the term "gun dealer" was interpreted by many to include persons who traded primarily on the black and grey markets, as well as licensed retailers and wholesalers. Many of them (27%) said they had used stolen guns to settle their debts; nearly two-fifths (of the "professionals," vs. 31% of all gun thieves) had also sold stolen guns to their drug dealer.

There was a definite connection between drug abuse and "professional" gun theft as we have defined it here. Relative to the total sample, the "professional" gun thieves were heavy drug abusers and high rate drug dealers; more than half of them (53%, vs. 27% of the total sample) had made dozens or hundreds of drug deals. They were also more likely than the average man in the sample to have been armed during the conviction offense (about two-thirds, vs. just over half of all respondents); relative to other armed criminals, they showed a preference for sawed-off shotguns (21% vs. 13% among the total armed criminals sample).

Yet another follow-up question asked, "Of all the guns you have ever stolen, did you ever keep one for your own personal use?" Although less than a third of the gun thieves usually stole guns for themselves, fully two-thirds had kept at least one for their own personal use, at some time, for some reason. Predictably, the tendency to have kept stolen guns for personal use increased regularly as one moves to the more predatory categories of the typology, reaching a peak among the Handgun Predators, of whom 90% had kept a stolen gun for their personal use at least once.

Men who indicated that they had kept a gun for personal use were asked why. The most frequent answer, given by 68%, was that "it was a nice piece," presumably, a nicer piece than the one they were then carrying. Theft appears to serve as a mechanism of technological upgrading among the criminal population. The next most frequent reason for keeping a stolen gun, mentioned by 37%, was that "I did not have a gun then." Roughly a third mentioned that "a stolen gun could never be traced to me"; predictably, this response was especially common among the more serious

gun abusers. Other reasons for keeping stolen guns were all cited less frequently, for example, "I collect guns" (mentioned by 20%), or "I couldn't find anyone to sell it to" (12%).

All who reported the theft of a gun were asked if they had ever sold or traded a stolen gun; 90% had. Of these, 16% had done so "just once," 47% had done so "a few times," and 37% had done so "many times." "A few times" was the modal response among all categories except the Predators; among the Predators, "many times" was the most common response. About 95% of the Predators (both groups) had sold or traded a stolen gun at least once in their careers.

Men who reported having sold or traded at least one stolen firearm were queried about their customers in these transactions. The most frequent sale was "to a friend," mentioned by about two-thirds overall. This, in fact, was the modal response in all categories, with percentages ranging from 53% of the Unarmed to 73% among the Handgun Predators.

Next to friends, black market sales predominated, especially to fences (49%) and drug dealers (31%). Sales "to a stranger on the street" were also fairly common, having been mentioned by 25%. Other frequently mentioned outlets included pawnshops (21%), gun dealers (21%), "people I was in debt to" (20%), and family members (12%). Three men volunteered the information that they had sold stolen guns to policemen.

The pattern of commerce revealed in these responses is, of course, very similar to the pattern of acquisition noted previously. Felons with stolen guns to sell tended to sell them to the same sources that other felons exploited to acquire guns. Some of these men, clearly, were suppliers to the stolen gun market, and others were consumers in the market; realistically, most of these men were probably both suppliers and consumers at various times. It is also of some significance that the 693 men who entered the "who did you sell to?" sequence gave a total of 1,670 answers, for an average of 2.4 channels of distribution per man. More than a third of these channels involved close associates (friends, family, creditors); another third involved clearly criminal enterprises (fences and drug dealers). Still, roughly a sixth of the commerce in stolen guns involved legitimate or quasi-legitimate businesses (gun shops, pawn shops). Most of the remainder was sold on the street. Of course, not all stolen guns entered these channels of distribution; as noted earlier, about two thirds have kept at least one gun for their own use.

As we reported earlier, about 46% of the sample's most recent handguns were definitely stolen (including the ones stolen directly by the felons themselves), and an additional 24% were "probably stolen." A cross-tabulation of this question with the questions on where and how their most recent handguns were obtained gives some additional sense of the commerce in stolen guns.

For this purpose, we ignore the direct thefts and focus on the handguns acquired through other means. To illustrate, 70 men reported that they had either rented or borrowed their most recent handgun; of these, 39 (56%) were rated as "probably" or "definitely" stolen. Of the 349 handguns "bought for cash," 52 were "definitely stolen" and 101 were "probably stolen." Thus, about 44% of the cash purchases made by these men involved stolen guns. Even among the 112 guns received in trades or as gifts, 51% were considered likely to have been stolen. Overall, of the 531 handguns our respondents obtained other than through a personal theft, 259, or 49%, were judged either definitely or probably stolen. In short, stolen firearms circulated freely through all the mechanisms of exchange exploited by these men.

Men who told us they had stolen at least one gun in their careers were asked about the sources from which these guns had been stolen. These data show that about half the thefts involved street crimes, residential burglaries, or other crimes against strangers, and that about a third of them involved friends or family of the respondent. In roughly one theft in ten, the victim was an ostensibly legitimate firearms outlet--gun shop, pawn shop, department store, or, in a few cases, the military. The remaining thefts, about 7% of the total, involved illicit sources: fences, drug dealers, and black market operators.

We asked the gun thieves not only about the sources but also about the locations of their gun thefts. The modal response was "from a home or apartment," mentioned by 84%. In other words, 84% of the men who had ever stolen at least one gun had stolen a gun directly from a private residence. This fraction varied little across the categories of the typology.

About half the gun thieves (51%) indicated that they had stolen a gun "from a car;" this was especially common among the Handgun Predators. The next most common response was "from a store," mentioned by about a third of all gun thieves and by half the two Predator groups. Stealing a gun "directly off a person" was admitted by 27%; most of these thefts involved the serious gun abusers (Sporadics and Predators).

"Off a truck during shipment" was mentioned by 15%; 14% claim to have stolen a gun directly from a policeman. In both cases, the Predators showed the highest percentages of all groups. About 8% of the gun thieves reported having stolen from manufacturers; again, the Predators led the list.

In terms of the number of thefts, then, most involved residences and vehicles, although thefts from commercial establishments, shippers, and manufacturers also seem alarmingly common. In terms of the total number of guns stolen, however, it is possible that theft from residences is less important and theft from these other potential high volume sources is more important. The frequency with which these men reported thefts against potential high-volume sources argues in favor of additional research on this aspect of the gun theft problem.

# Handgun Controls and Weapons Substitution

One among several widely debated issues in the area of guns and criminal violence concerns the likely response of the criminal population to various gun control measures. Some (e.g., Zimring, 1968) have argued that in the complete absence of all guns, criminals would substitute knives. Since knives are generally less lethal than firearms, the suggestion is that such a measure would cause the rate of violent killings to decrease. Others (e.g., Kates, 1978; Kleck, 1983) have argued, in contrast, that the option to ban all firearms is politically unrealistic, that in the existing political climate, the more likely policy option is to ban all handguns (or certain restricted classes of handguns), and that in the complete absence of handguns, criminals would tend to substitute shoulder weapons instead, suitably modified (if the need be) to make these weapons adequately concealable. Since, in general, shoulder weapons are more lethal than handguns, the suggestion is that such measures might well cause the rate of violent killings to increase. Arguing from this general perspective, Kleck has suggested that "handgun only" controls could well be, in his words, "a policy disaster in the making."

Of course, no one knows for sure just what criminals would do if society could somehow attain the hypothetical "no handguns" condition, or some close variant (i.e., no cheap handguns, no Saturday Night Special handguns, etc.) The possibility that a substantial fraction would substitute more lethal weapons instead is, however, sufficiently real that some inquiry into the matter is in order. Although the felons in our sample may not be the best and most reliable source of information on what might happen under certain future circumstances, their views on these issues are certainly of some relevance.[35]

Under the provisions of existing Federal law, it is already illegal for a convicted felon to acquire a firearm. It is of some interest and pertinent to the concerns of this volume to see how the likely post-release firearms behavior of our sample would be constrained by this fact. Interestingly, most (73%) of the men in our sample were aware of this restriction. This notwithstanding, most of them did not anticipate much trouble in acquiring a handgun once released from prison.[36]

First, as in polls of the general public, most of the men in our sample (82%) agreed that "gun laws affect only law-abiding citizens; criminals will always be able to get guns."[37] In like fashion, most (88%) also agreed that "a criminal who wants a handgun is going to get one, no matter how much it costs." A more direct question sequence posed the following hypothetical situation: "Suppose now that you have been released from this prison and you have decided that you need to get a handgun for some reason. Let's also suppose you don't already have one. How much trouble do you think it would be for you to get a handgun after you get out of this prison?" Follow-up questions asked for details--how much would it cost, how long would it take, where would you go to get it, etc.

Overall, the modal response for the "how much trouble?" question was "no trouble at all," the answer given by 59%. Another 16% said that it would be "only a little trouble." Thus, three quarters of the sample believed they could obtain handguns with little or no trouble subsequent to their release from prison. This was the result for the total sample. Men who were experienced in using firearms to commit crime anticipated even less difficulties: among the Predators, for example, more than four-fifths thought they could arm themselves with little or no trouble, and much the same held for the Sporadic Handgun Users as well.

Whether these are realistic judgments or not is certainly an open question, but at the moment, we have no evidence to suggest that they are not. Clearly, many of these men, especially the firearms abusers, had acquired firearms in the past, and given an average of 3 prior incarcerations, many would have at some previous point been exactly in the situation in question. Therefore, it is likely that these data represent reports of past experience as much as judgments of future possibilities. For this reason, we are inclined to accept them as accurate.

A follow-up question asked how much each man felt he would have to pay to get the handgun he wanted. Many of the men responded "nothing" at this point, adding that they would simply steal one. Among those who

---

35. It cannot be stressed too heavily that all these questions are entirely hypothetical; responses must be understood in this framework. These data, in short, are suggestive but by no means definitive.

Some have maintained that the options posed in our questions are extremely unrealistic, especially the option to carry sawed off rifles and shotguns. The claim is that even cut down, such weapons are far too bulky for typical criminal use. Bulk, to be sure, would be a serious, but not necessarily prohibitive, problem. Many shotguns on the market (especially those with pump actions) simply cannot be cut down to any convenient or readily concealable size. Many others, however, and in particular the very popular one shot breech loaders, can be cut down to a size not much larger than at least some of the larger handguns. Many of the felons in our sample, the Shotgun Predators to be precise, already used sawed off shotguns in lieu of handguns. Other felons could presumably do the same.

36. Retail sale of a firearm to a convicted felon is forbidden under the provisions of the Gun Control Act of 1968. The transfer of any firearm to a felon, whether through retail sale or any other less formal means, is forbidden under the provisions of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act. In sum, any transfer of a firearm to a convicted felon is an illegal act.

37. In a 1978 poll conducted by Patrick Caddell, 78% agreed that "gun control laws affect only law abiding citizens; criminals will always be able to find guns," virtually identical to the felons' responses. Likewise, the 1978 DMI poll found 85-90% agreeing that "registration of handguns will not prevent criminals from acquiring or using them for illegal purposes." Consensus on the point is thus nearly unanimous among felons and non-felons alike.

stated a specific dollar price, the modal response was $100, and the overall sample mean response = $114. Acquiring a handgun subsequent to release was neither especially troublesome nor especially expensive, at least as these men saw it.

We also asked how long they thought it would take. The modal response was "a few hours." Nearly 80% of the sample said they could get a handgun in a few days or less; among the Predators, the figure rose to about 90%. Over half the Predators said they could arm themselves in a few hours.

The final questions in the sequence asked how and where they would go about trying to obtain a handgun. About three-fifths figured they would simply buy one for cash, another fifth thought they would just borrow one, and a tenth said they would go out and steal one. These patterns were essentially identical across the categories of the typology.

As to where they would go to obtain a handgun, informal sources predominated. Most said they would have attempted to get one from a friend, and this was especially the case for the Predators. In the total sample, the next most likely sources, in order, were "on the street" (42%), from a fence (35%), on the black market (31%), "my drug dealer" (20%), a pawnshop (19%), a gun shop (16%), from a family member (15%), from a hardware or department store (8%), and from mail order outlet (5%). It is worth noting that where these men said they would go to get a handgun on release was very similar to where their most recent firearms had in fact been obtained.

In sum, given the existing firearms market, most of the felons in our sample did not anticipate much trouble in arming themselves upon release. Suppose, however, that key features of the existing market were changed in significant ways. How might the men in this sample respond? The study explored several options in this regard, each relevant in one or another way to at least some proposed solutions to the problem of handgun violence.[38]

All these questions are highly and unavoidably hypothetical, and one may properly wonder just how many of these men would in fact do what they say they would do if such situations existed. Still, given the nature of this sample, their responses even to hypothetical possibilities are of more than passing interest. Data are shown in Table 22.

One much-discussed policy option is to "tax the bottom out" of the handgun market, i.e., to greatly increase the price of the cheapest available handgun. This proposal is rooted in the belief (but see the earlier discussion) that cheap handguns are over-represented among the handguns used to commit crimes. Panel 1 of Table 22 shows the responses of the sample to the pricing strategy.

In the aggregate, the modal response was not to carry any weapon, mentioned by 36%, seemingly an optimistic finding. Note, however, that this response was heavily concentrated among the less predatory categories, especially among the Unarmed Criminals (60% of whom said they would not carry any weapon under this condition). Among the Predators, the number who said they would not carry any weapon in the face of the pricing strategy was on the order of 10%, and for the Sporadics, on the order of 20%. Thus, while at least some of these men would apparently be affected by exceptionally high handgun prices, 80-90% of them apparently would not be.

A few men in all categories said they would respond to the pricing option by carrying knives or clubs--these represented about 8% of the total sample, some 15% of the Improvisors, 21% of the Knife Criminals, and less than a tenth of everyone else. The simple expedient of borrowing the handgun one needed was mentioned by 25% of the total sample and by approximately a third of the three most predatory groups. Among the Sporadics, in fact, borrowing the necessary weapon was the modal response, followed by stealing one (26%) and not carrying anything (22%).

Among the Handgun Predators, the pattern was somewhat different: most (36%) would steal the handgun they wanted, about the same proportion (34%) would borrow it, and 13% would saw off a shoulder weapon. Among the Shotgun Predators, sawing off a shoulder weapon was the modal response to the pricing strategy (given by 35%), followed in turn by borrowing a handgun (29%), then stealing one (19%). Given the above patterns, it is clear that most of these men thought they could readily evade the pricing strategy.

The answers given in response to the pricing question, moreover, are not unrealistic. As we saw earlier, most of our sample, especially the more predatory ones, associated with other men who also owned and carried firearms, so the possibility of borrowing a handgun would usually be open to them. (To be sure, not everybody can borrow; there have to be some owners around to borrow from.) Open too is the option to steal a gun, as we have seen. We have more to say later about the final option, sawing off a shoulder weapon, but it too turns out to be a real one. Whether these men can actually be counted on to act as they said they would act is not known, but there is a certain consistency between these reports and what they told us elsewhere in the questionnaire.

A proposal similar in many ways to the pricing strategy is a ban on the so-called Saturday Night Special, the small, cheap, low-caliber little handguns. We have already noted that the characteristics of the Saturday Night Special are not especially high on the list of things these men looked for in a handgun; still, a fair amount of crime is committed with cheap handguns, and it is an interesting and relevant question to ask what might happen if no cheap handguns were available.

Panel 2 of Table 22 shows the response of the sample to the "ban SNS's" strategy. Overall, the modal response was to obtain a bigger and more expensive handgun, mentioned by 45%. Among the Handgun Predators, this option was chosen by 68%, among the Sporadics, by 63%, and among the One-Timers, by 47%. The next most frequent response in the aggregate was not to carry any weapon, mentioned by a third, but again, this response was heavily concentrated in the less predatory categories (especially the Unarmed Criminals, among

38. In interpreting the ensuing data, the differences between our sample of prisoners and the larger population of street criminals should be especially kept in mind. Our felons, to emphasize, are older, more violent and more hardened than the average street criminal would be. How our sample might respond to some of the offered options is, for that reason, not necessarily indicative of how criminals in general might respond.

Table 22

**Weapons Choices Under Various Handgun Control Policies**

| | TOTAL | UNARMED | IMP | KNIFE | 1-TIME | SPORADIC | HG PRED | SG PRED |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. "Suppose the cheapest handgun you could find cost more than you could possibly afford to pay for it. What would you do then? | | | | | | | | |
| STEAL A HANDGUN | 20 | 11 | 12 | 22 | 16 | 26 | 36 | 19 |
| SAW OFF A SHOULDER GUN | 11 | 7 | 8 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 13 | 35 |
| BORROW A HANDGUN | 25 | 17 | 23 | 17 | 27 | 36 | 34 | 29 |
| CARRY A KNIFE OR CLUB | 8 | 5 | 15 | 21 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| NOT CARRY ANY WEAPON | 36 | 60 | 42 | 28 | 38 | 22 | 10 | 11 |
| (N=) | (1538) | (563) | (65) | (112) | (207) | (230) | (276) | (85) |
| 2. "Let's suppose that the handgun you really wanted was a small, cheap, low caliber little handgun, but that there just weren't any of them around for you to get. If you thought you wanted such a handgun, but found you just couldn't get one, what do you think you would do instead? | | | | | | | | |
| GET BIGGER, MORE EXPENSIVE | 45 | 30 | 34 | 32 | 47 | 63 | 68 | 38 |
| SAW OFF SHOULDER WEAPON | 12 | 7 | 6 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 18 | 45 |
| CARRY KNIFE OR CLUB | 10 | 6 | 19 | 36 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 8 |
| NOT CARRY | 33 | 57 | 40 | 24 | 35 | 18 | 6 | 9 |
| (N=) | (1495) | (539) | (67) | (110) | (204) | (218) | (272) | (85) |
| 3. "Some people say that if there were no handguns at all, criminals would carry knives or clubs instead. Other people say that if there were no handguns, criminals would carry rifles and shotguns that had been sawed off so you could hide them. Which of these comes closest to your own beliefs? | | | | | | | | |
| CARRY KNIVES OR CLUBS | 21 | 25 | 39 | 32 | 19 | 17 | 10 | 10 |
| CARRY SAWED-OFF | 64 | 59 | 43 | 53 | 66 | 67 | 75 | 82 |
| NOT CARRY | 7 | 12 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| CARRY KNIVES AND SAWED-OFF | 8 | 5 | 11 | 11 | 9 | 11 | 12 | 7 |
| (N=) | (1644) | (611) | (74) | (119) | (229) | (236) | (288) | (87) |
| 4. "And how about you personally...If you wanted to carry a handgun but you just couldn't get your hands on one, which of the following do you think you would do? | | | | | | | | |
| CARRY KNIFE OR CLUB | 24 | 18 | 32 | 50 | 26 | 26 | 20 | 14 |
| CARRY SAWED-OFF | 40 | 22 | 27 | 31 | 33 | 51 | 72 | 74 |
| NOT CARRY | 37 | 60 | 41 | 19 | 41 | 23 | 8 | 12 |
| (N=) | (1636) | (607) | (71) | (119) | (228) | (233) | | |

whom it was chosen by 57%). Among the Predators, the option not to carry in the face of the SNS ban was chosen by less than ten percent. About a fifth of the Handgun Predators would shift to sawed-off weapons.

Zimring (1972) has analyzed death from handgun assaults as a function of caliber. The result is straightforward: as the caliber increases, so does the death rate. Since more expensive handguns tend to larger caliber weapons, and since they are typically designed to handle hotter ammunition loads, one may presume that the rate of death would also increase with the quality of the weapon as well. Thus, the possible shift to "bigger, more expensive handguns" in the face of a Saturday Night Special ban, as reported by our sample, would probably involve a shift from less lethal to more lethal firearms.

A final possibility we explored was a complete ban on all handguns. Responses of the sample to this option are shown in Panels 3 and 4. In the aggregate, the modal response (given by 40%) was to carry a sawed off weapon, followed by not carrying anything (37%), with the knife or club option being the least popular (24%).

As before, the option not to carry was mentioned most often by men who did not carry in any case--by 60% of the Unarmed Criminals, by 41% of the Improvisors, and, interestingly, by 41% of the One-Timers as well. Also predictably, the Knife Criminals would continue to carry knives. Among the Sporadics, just about half would "move up" to sawed off equipment, about a quarter would carry knives or clubs, and about a quarter would go unarmed. Among the Predators, the result was even worse. Three quarters of them said they would carry sawed off shoulder weapons if there weren't any handguns around for them to carry instead.

There is at least some reason to take these men seriously when they say they would substitute a sawed-off rifle or shotgun under the various specified conditions. Many of the men who said that this is what they would do also said that they had in fact sawed off rifles and shotguns in the past.

First, most of the men in the sample agreed with the hypothetical possibility that "if a criminal wants a handgun but can't get one, he can always saw off a rifle or a shotgun." Agreement with this sentiment ran from 80-90%. Again hypothetically, most of the men in the sample thought it would be "easy" (39%) or "very easy" (32%) for them to saw off a shoulder weapon, and in the Predator categories, the fraction thinking it would be easy or very easy ran upwards to about 90%.

We also asked, "Have you personally ever sawed off a rifle or shotgun?" Overall, 29% of the sample had, a fraction that varied from 9% of the Unarmed Criminals up to about 70% in the two Predator categories.

Perhaps more directly to the point, 50% of the men in the sample who said they would carry a sawed off weapon in the face of a complete handgun ban also said they had themselves actually sawed off a weapon at some point in their lives. This was the aggregate result across all seven categories. Among the Handgun Predators specifically, 77% of those who said they would carry sawed off equipment also said they had sawed off a rifle or shotgun at some time.

Men who indicated that they had sawed off a rifle or shotgun were asked a few follow-up questions. About 70% of those who had ever sawed off shotguns had done so more than once; among the Predators, this was true of about 85%. On average, the men who had ever done so were about 18 years old at the time. Among those who had ever done so, 56% reported that they had used a sawed off weapon at least once in committing a crime, a percentage that varied in a remarkably linear manner from 6% of the Unarmed Criminals to 75% of the Handgun Predators and 92% of the Shotgun Predators.

In short, here as in the other options discussed earlier, there is a certain consistency between what these men said they <u>would do</u> and what they said they <u>had</u> in fact <u>done</u> at other times in their lives. Certainly, some of the responses obtained in this question sequence have to be discounted as bravado; others, with equal certainty, are genuine. The message these men seem to be sending is that their predatory designs on other human beings will not be thwarted for lack of the appropriate equipment. Our view is that this message ought to be taken seriously.

# Implications

In an oft-quoted article published in 1976, Bruce-Biggs characterized the perennial debate in American political life over what to do about firearms as "The Great American Gun War," suggesting, correctly in this case, a rather more rancorous and hotly contested arena of public policy than one might normally expect to encounter. There may be some issues in American politics where feelings run more strongly, but not many; few issues evoke such passion or have had a longer run on the political playbill than what to do about crime and the guns with which crimes are committed.

Although there is no love lost among the contestants in this particular public policy arena, there is at least some agreement among all contending groups that one policy goal should be to reduce significantly the use of firearms in crimes of all sorts. No one denies that the American crime rate is unacceptably high or that the use of firearms to commit crimes is a pressing national problem. The issues at the heart of contention are whether and how this goal can best be reached.

Broadly speaking, the methods available to achieve the agreed-upon goal fall into two categories: (i) reducing the ability of criminals to obtain firearms in the first place; and/or (ii) reducing the criminals' use of guns in committing crime once guns have been obtained. Clearly, the issues are closely related: if we could accomplish (i), (ii) would then be moot. Hence, the second issue is only an issue because of the presumption that complete success at preventing criminals from obtaining firearms will probably not be possible.

Both available methods are rife with complexity. It is easy to agree, for example, that one goal of policy should be to "keep guns out of the hands of criminals." Indeed, other than the criminals themselves, it is hard to imagine anyone who would not agree. But this presumes that criminals can somehow be easily identified before the fact, a task that has occupied criminologists for a century with little success.

Unacceptably adverse consequences to non-criminal gun owners represent the single greatest barrier to the design of effective policy in the "gun crime" area. A stiff tax on handguns imposed at the point of production would no doubt raise the price of handguns enough to drive some criminals out of the handgun market, but it would also drive millions of non-criminals out of the market as well. The cheap, low quality handgun that is not available for use in crime is also not available to impoverished families in high-crime neighborhoods who feel (correctly or otherwise) that they need a gun to defend against the predation rampant on their streets. A jurisdiction that requires a week long waiting period to obtain a handgun while the police run the appropriate criminal records check will come across an occasional criminal attempting to obtain a handgun through customary channels and enormous numbers of other people for whom both the waiting period and the records check were altogether immaterial.

Aside from the spill-over of effects onto the non-criminal population, there is also the problem of unintended effects on the target (criminal) population.

A policy designed to prevent the transfer of firearms to felons through customary retail channels (such as the Gun Control Act of 1968) might only result in an increase in the rate of gun thefts by felons from non-felon owners, or an increased level of activity in the informal non-retail market. A policy intended to prevent criminals from carrying small, cheap handguns might cause them to carry big, expensive, and more lethal handguns instead. The intended effect of virtually every piece of "gun crime" legislation passed in the 20th Century has been along one or the other of the lines suggested earlier: to prevent criminals from obtaining guns, or to prevent them from using guns once obtained. And yet, the number of armed criminals and the amount of armed crime has tended to increase, not abate. The actual effects, in other words, have clearly not been the intended ones.

The preceding comments are not intended to create despair, and much less to enumerate exhaustively all of the complications that are inherent in this particular public policy area. Our point, rather, is to illustrate that the issues involved go well beyond anything that can be learned from data supplied by a sample of state prisoners. Much, in fact, goes well beyond what could be learned from any study; and many relevant empirical questions cannot be answered with data on prisoners alone.

Research of the sort reported here is often very good in describing the nature of a problem and rather poor in suggesting adequate solutions. This study is no exception: we have tried to obtain reasonably accurate readings on certain facets of the criminal acquisition and use of guns, but by themselves, the findings of the research do not immediately suggest any effective solutions. "Policy implications" are just that: implications that derive from one particular interpretation of a set of research findings, certainly not policy conclusions or recommendations whose wisdom is self-evident now that the findings are in hand.

In order to prevent criminals from obtaining guns, we need to know where and how their guns are obtained; to prevent them from carrying guns and using them in crime, we need to know why they carry and how they use them, or in short, the role that firearms play in the lifestyle of the felon population. Most of the policy implications of this study derive from the information we have assembled on these topics.

Again, we must emphasize once more that the implications discussed in this section--as the findings on which they are based--apply only to the particular criminal population represented by our sample of adult male felons incarcerated in state correctional institutions. Other offender groups--such as juvenile offenders, first offenders, female offenders, and less

serious (non-felony) adult male offenders--may have very different patterns of firearms acquisition, ownership, and use from those of the criminal population to which our implications are directed and thus may be targeted more appropriately by other types of criminal justice policies and practices.

## The Nature of the Illicit Firearms Market

Firearms manufacturers are, of course, the ultimate source of virtually all the guns that are ever used for any purpose. This obvious fact means that guns come into the hands of criminals by means of a system of distribution that connects manufacturers and criminals through a chain of transfers. The early links in this chain ordinarily involve firearms wholesalers and retailers, a fact that tempts policy makers to consider using these intermediaries as points to detect potential firearms abusers and thereby to prevent firearms from falling into improper hands. The ultimate efficacy of such an approach depends to a considerable extent on the length of the chain of transfers and the location of retail outlets within the chain.

The findings from our study cast some light on the nature of the transfer chain: we cannot reconstruct the complete chain from manufacturer to criminal consumer, but we have considerable detail on the last link in the chain, the transfer of a firearm into criminal hands. From the viewpoint of policy, two features of these data stand out:

(i) Legitimate firearms retailers play a minor role as direct sources of handguns for adult felony offenders.

Not more than about one in six of the most recent handguns acquired by our sample was obtained through a customary retail transaction involving a licensed firearms dealer; the market, rather, is dominated by informal, off the record, transactions, mostly involving friends and associates, family members, and various black market sources. The means of acquisition from these informal sources include cash purchase, swaps and trades, borrowing and renting, and often theft. (Indeed, our impression is that the verbs, "borrow," "take," "steal," and "rent" were blurred and indistinct in the vocabularies of our respondents.) Whatever the verbal ambiguities, however, it is clear that our sample was enmeshed in a largely informal market in firearms that served as the immediate source of their supply.

The implication of this result is clearly not that we should give up on our efforts to interdict criminal acquisition of handguns at the point of retail sale. To so argue would be equivalent to arguing that we should stop the airport metal searches because they only rarely detect a weapons-carrying passenger. Restrictions at the point of retail sale, that is, may serve a useful preventative function; at minimum, the acquisition of a firearm by a felon should be somewhat more complicated than just walking into a gun shop and buying one. The implication, rather, concerns the ultimate effect of such efforts, which is not to prevent (or, we suspect, even seriously complicate) the acquisition of guns by criminals but rather to force them out of the retail market and into other and less formal channels of distribution. The further implication, of course, is that if we do intend seriously to complicate the acquisition of guns by felons, then methods must be found for intervening in the informal firearms market. The transfer of a firearm to a felon, whether formal or informal, is already illegal, so legislation to make it illegal is clearly not the answer. By their very nature, such transactions are difficult or impossible to detect, so "stricter enforcement" of existing laws is also probably not the answer. One might as a matter of Federal policy require that every firearms transaction be reported to the cognizant authorities, and the appropriate criminal records check undertaken; but one quickly senses that this measure would have little or no effect on the criminal users whom we are trying to interdict and a considerable effect on legitimate users among whom a large informal market also exists.

There is, in short, some reason to doubt whether any politically acceptable, implementable, effective, and Constitutional method of intervening in the informal market can be found; the implication of our results is not a method by which this could be done, but rather the information that it must be done if we are to prevent or even seriously hamper the acquisition of firearms by criminals.

(ii) Our study also confirms the critical role that gun theft plays in connecting the adult felony offender market to its firearms supply.

Half the men in this sample had stolen at least one gun at some time in their lives; many had stolen more than one; a few had stolen guns in extremely large numbers. At least 40%, and perhaps as much as 70%, of the most recent handguns owned by this sample were stolen weapons.

For various (more or less obvious) reasons, the ideal "gun crime" policy is one that impacts directly on the illicit user but leaves the legitimate user pretty much alone. This, however, presupposes a sharp distinction between the licit and illicit markets, a distinction that is seriously eroded by the apparently heavy volume of gun theft. To leave the legitimate user "pretty much alone" at least implies a guarantee of the right to acquire firearms under some set of prescribed conditions; and yet, all else equal, any gun that can be legitimately possessed by a legal and law-abiding owner can be stolen from its owner and subsequently fall into criminal hands.

Again, our data suggest little by way of a method through which the gun theft problem could be attacked. In terms of the total number of thefts, thefts from homes and apartments are sufficiently numerous to suggest as one approach that legitimate gun owners be made more aware of the problem and the strategies available to them to prevent theft of their weapons. Police chiefs who are empowered to issue permits to own or purchase firearms might be one point at which this information could be imparted; information booklets produced by the manufacturers for inclusion with shipped weapons would be another.

Legitimate gun owners might also be induced to exercise greater caution in storing their weapons in relatively theft-resistant ways--for example, by tax credits or insurance discounts similar to those given for energy conservation measures or the installation of home fire detectors.

Finally, some jurisdictions have begun to consider the liability of a legitimate owner whose gun is stolen and subsequently used to commit a crime. Our data do

not speak directly to the advisability or likely consequences of such measures, but certainly, the right to own guns must be accompanied by certain corollary responsibilities, and perhaps these responsibilities include all reasonable precaution in storing one's weapons in relatively theft-proof ways. (To be sure, one would still want to insist that the liability of the thief exceed the liability of his victim.)

Although house and apartment thefts are numerous, they may not account for the largest number of stolen weapons that enter the illicit market. A distressingly large number of our respondents also reported having stolen guns from potential high-volume sources: manufacturers, shippers, wholesalers, retailers, and even military establishments.

The "scale" problem is pertinent in this case: one successful hijacking of a truck during shipment could well net as many total firearms as would be netted in a few thousand household thefts; consequently, the prevention of one hijacking is as useful to society as a whole as the prevention of a few thousand household thefts. All else equal, then, resources might be directed disproportionally to preventing thefts from high-volume sources. Unfortunately, our data cannot show whether high-volume sources account for more of the total volume than household thefts, only that they may; this, therefore, is an area that requires further research before the policy implication is obvious.

At minimum, society as a whole could increase the penalty for the crime of gun theft, perhaps by making gun theft a felony whatever the intent of the thief. In most jurisdictions at present, the theft of a gun from a household or store is considered to be a no more serious crime than the theft of any other object of equivalent value.

Whatever the methods one might imagine, however, the nature of the task that society confronts is made reasonably clear by our results: if we are to make headway in preventing the acquisition of guns by criminals, we must find some way to intervene in the informal gun market and to close off the supply of guns obtained, directly or indirectly, through theft.

## Crime Guns: Quality and Price

Many "gun crime" proposals that have surfaced in recent years are targeted to particular classes of firearms: to handguns in general, or somewhat more commonly, to certain restricted classes of handguns, particularly those of the small, cheap, low-quality variety. The rationale for such proposals is twofold: (i) legitimate owners have little or no need for such firearms, and (ii) illegitimate owners do.

To assess the nature of the criminal demand for these kinds of handguns, we asked for considerable information both on the characteristics our sample preferred in a handgun and on the characteristics of the most recent handgun they had actually possessed. Neither of these represents perfect data on the nature of the criminal handgun demand: the "preferred characteristics" questions may tell us more about our sample's fantasies concerning the "perfect" handgun than about the true nature of their demand; the characteristics of the most recent handgun may or may not generalize to the typical handgun that felons own, carry, and use to commit crimes. Still, neither source of data suggests much interest among our sample of felons in small, cheap handguns; such interest as we observed was concentrated among felons who had never used firearms to commit crimes. The criminals in our sample both preferred to carry, and actually carried, relatively large, well-made weapons.

The average price paid by our felons for their most recent handguns was not especially high, falling in the $100-150 range; still, the average quality was well beyond the level of the "cheapies." The most common among the recent handguns was a Smith and Wesson .38 equipped with a four inch barrel; no more than about 15% of the most recent handguns would qualify as Saturday Night Specials. A comparison between the average dollar cost and the average apparent quality suggests that prices in the informal and black markets are heavily discounted, in all likelihood because of the dominance of stolen weapons in these markets.

Whatever the price paid or the mode of acquisition, however, one result is clear: the more a felon used his guns in crime, the higher the quality of the equipment he carried. Among the truly predatory criminals in the sample, the small, cheap handgun was not the weapon of choice.

Given the rate of gun theft reported by the sample, it is also no surprise that price was not a very important consideration. Our interpretation of a question on how much they would be willing to pay for a suitable handgun is that felons are willing to pay the going rate. For what it is worth, far more interest was shown in matters such as accuracy, firepower, untraceability, and quality of construction than in price.

The implication of these findings is that the strategy of purging the market of small, cheap weapons may simply be irrelevant to predatory felons, who are most likely to use their guns to commit crimes. In addition, the apparent price insensitivity argues against a policy that stresses raising the price of guns to keep them from criminal hands. Either or both of these strategies may well prove advisable for other reasons; it is possible, for example, that small, cheap handguns are much more important to first offenders, juveniles, or other classes of criminals who are on average younger, less hardened, and less violent than the men in our sample. So far as the sorts of men who end up doing time in state prisons are concerned, however, it is fairly clear that they do not have much interest in small, cheap firearms in the first place.

## Why Criminals Carry and Use Guns

"As long as you got a lot of fire power, you're all right. There was a rule with me that I always have a gun at all times, 'cause sometimes you'd be out in the street and the opportunity just present itself where you see a lot of money. Then you want to be armed. (...) So I had the gun always on me to take advantage of opportunities--and to protect myself. A gun is like a part of me. I could wake up in the morning, and before I get out of the bed to go into the bathroom, I strap my shoulder holster over my shoulder. I never would go out of the house without it."

The preceding is not a quotation from one of our respondents, although it certainly might have been. It is, rather, a passage from John Allen's Assault with a Deadly Weapon: The Autobiography of a Street Criminal (Allen, 1977: 179-180).

John Allen is typical of the predatory felons in our sample in many ways: he was urban, black, and uneducated, commenced his life of crime in his early teens, acquired his first firearm at age 13 by stealing it from his grandfather, was a heroin addict on several occasions and a heavy abuser of drugs, had a lengthy criminal record as both a juvenile and an adult, spent much of his life in prison, was prone to fits of violent rage, and seldom passed by an opportunity to commit a crime, be it armed robbery, car theft, drug dealing, pimping, housebreaking, or whatever.

His motives for owning and carrying guns, as expressed in the above passage, are also typical of the motives expressed by our sample: when armed, one is prepared "for anything that might happen"--an opportunity to commit a crime or a need to defend oneself against the assaults or predations of others. His behavior in regard to the weapon is also perhaps typical: as his comment concerning the morning regimen indicates, carrying a gun was an habitual part of his daily routine.

The possession and carrying of firearms by felons is part and parcel of their day-to-day existence, no more unusual in their circles than the carrying of wallets or purses would be in others. The motivation to do so goes well beyond the instrumental use of guns in committing crimes, although as Allen's testimony and our data make clear, this is assuredly one important motive. Survival in an uncertain but hostile and violent world is, with equal assurance, another.

Most of the gun owning felons in our sample grew up around guns, were introduced to guns at an early age, and had owned and used guns ever since. Most also hung around with other men who owned and carried guns. In such circles, a handgun is at least an acceptable article of attire, if not a de rigeur requirement. Not to suggest that these handguns are strictly ornamental: our felons tended in the majority to keep their guns loaded at all times, and to fire them at a fairly regular rate, often enough at other people: half the men in our sample claimed to have fired a gun at someone at some time; half also claimed to have been fired upon.

It is therefore no surprise that their major acknowledged motive for acquiring and carrying guns was for the purpose of self-protection. In an environment where crime and violence are pervasive, and where many of one's friends and associates routinely carry guns, there is plenty to "protect" oneself against. "Self protection," in this context at least, must be interpreted with some caution, of course. Part of it no doubt implies protection against being preyed upon or continually hassled by others who are better armed; another part, perhaps the larger part, means protection against armed innocents, against the police, against the prospects of apprehension during a crime, and so on. The "insurance" that many of these men seek in carrying a gun is the insurance that they will always be the perpetrator and not the victim of the sorts of crimes they so regularly commit.

A third of our sample (of Gun Criminals), like John Allen, made it a practice to carry a gun more or less all the time; half carried whenever the circumstances seemed to suggest it: when doing a drug deal, when going out at night, when they were with other men who were carrying a gun, or more generally, whenever their ability to defend themselves might be at issue. One in five of the Gun Criminals claimed that they carried only when they intended to commit a specific crime. For these reasons, it appears quite clear that the decision to carry is the critical decision point, not the decision to use. Therefore, the decision to carry may be the most effective point of intervention.

How one might intervene in the decision to carry, however, is a rather difficult question to contemplate. Unlicensed carrying of concealed weapons is already illegal everywhere. Stricter enforcement of the CCW laws--for example, by periodic shakedowns of people on the streets or in the bars--is a theoretical possibility but raises obvious Constitutional issues; such dragnets would also net large numbers of otherwise legitimate people who are carrying a weapon sheerly out of fear. The largest handguns, and even some sawed off shoulder weapons, can be carried more or less unobtrusively; the smaller the weapon, the more true this becomes. A patrol officer might have some suspicions about a particular person, but anything short of open display would probably fail the criterion of probable cause.

If one accepts the idea that self-protection in a hostile and dangerous world is a principal motive for the ownership and carrying of guns among felons, then it follows that relevant policies to discourage the practice are those that would reduce the hostility and danger endemic to the social worlds inhabited by these men, that is, poor, urban neighborhoods in the main. As is well known, these neighborhoods produce not only most of the perpetrators, but also most of the victims, of crime; crime, violence, and routine handgun carrying are distinguishing features of urban slum existence.

Unfortunately, there are few issues in law enforcement that seem more intractable than that of substantially reducing violent crime in high crime areas: it is not at all clear just how such a goal might be attained, nor is it clear that communities would even support the effort by paying the added taxes that would be required.

Benign neglect is, of course, one possibility, one that has in fact been followed in at least some of our major cities from time to time. Here, the strategy is for the police to withdraw in force, hoping to contain the crime problem within certain boundaries. "Containment" has not proven to be a very effective strategy, however; crime has a habit of spilling over into the more affluent (and politically powerful) communities. A humane society should also not be indifferent to the victimization by crime of those who can least afford it and who are also victimized by many of society's other institutions and practices as well.

We conclude that a viable policy designed to reduce the criminal use of guns will have to find means of reducing the violence that is characteristic of many urban neighborhoods. That is, the reduction of crime in high-crime neighborhoods has to be as much in the center of law enforcement concern as protecting middle class citizens from the incursions of predatory criminals.

One might also simply give up dealing with the causes of gun carrying among felons and deal directly with the behavior itself, for example, through policies designed to encourage criminals to leave their weapons at home when they "go to work." Here, the effort would be concentrated on making the carrying and use of guns as difficult and as costly to the felon as possible.

One strategy presently in use in many jurisdictions, one that also enjoys overwhelming popular support (Wright et al., 1983: Ch. 12) is to provide enhanced (mandatory "add-on") penalities for the use of a gun (or other weapon) in committing crime (or, as in the Massachusetts case, a mandatory penalty for unlicensed carrying, whatever the actual usage or intent).

How successful this tactic has been in reducing the use of guns in crime has yet to be definitively assessed. Often, or so it appears, judges working with mandatory add-ons reduce the sentence for the main charge by an equivalent number of years, so that the total penalty remains much the same. Moreover, the add-on is often a small fraction of the main charge: a typical sentence for an armed robbery (assuming a lengthy prior record) might be ten to thirty years; a one or two year mandatory sentence enhancement might not alter the sentence enough to make any difference in the subjective calculations of the criminal.39

Ultimately, increased sentencing runs up against prison overcrowding as the limiting condition: it does no good to add additional years to a felon's sentence when the state corrections system has no prison space for him in any case.

Another problem in using mandatory add-ons for felonious gun use as a deterrent to the practice of carrying weapons is that most criminals do not expect to be caught in any case; what might happen to them once they are caught therefore cannot be much of a concern. (It should be added, nonetheless, that many of the non-gun criminals in our sample mentioned the prospect of a stiffer sentence when caught with a weapon as a very important reason not to carry one.)

A final problem in deterring the routine carrying of guns (whether through sentencing or through other measures), at least among the more predatory men in our sample, is that many of the crimes these men commit are directed towards victims who may themselves be armed. John Allen notes, "during the times when I was down, though, I would mainly rob the other dealers to get the drugs or the scratch I needed to buy my drugs" (1977: 176). Why an addict would rob his own dealer (or fellow dealers) is not hard to fathom: they have the drugs and they carry a lot of money. But to do so unarmed would be the height of folly, since the dealer being robbed will doubtlessly be armed himself. (In discussing one robbery of a fellow dealer, Allen notes, "This was a way we often got weapons--we'd take people's guns when we robbed them" p. 177.)

More generally, the presence of firearms among a felon's associates and victims is probably a greater threat to his well-being than the prospect of an extra year or two in prison. It would therefore be sensible to run the risk of an enhanced prison term by carrying a firearm oneself. In this sense, the predatory felon must be considered to be largely indifferent to deterrence through after-the-fact punishments; relative to what might happen if he needed a gun but did not have one, most after-the-fact punishments would pale to relative insignificance.

## Substitution and Other Neutralizing Side Effects

Data presented above raise the possibility that some of the more commonly advocated "gun crime" policies could well prove to have negative and unwanted side consequences. Bans on certain kinds of weapons, assuming a reasonable success rate, will cause some criminals not to commit the crimes they would have otherwise committed and will cause other criminals to commit the same crimes but armed with different weapons. The relative sizes of these two groups is a pertinent issue; so too is the question what these "different weapons" would be.

All the data we have presented on this issue are conjectural, and so their implications are even "iffier" than usual. Still, the large majority of the more predatory felons in our sample told us they would respond to various partial or total handgun bans with either lateral or upward substitution--the weapons they said they would carry under these hypothetical conditions were either just as lethal as, or more lethal than, the weapons they would have otherwise carried in any case. One may properly quarrel with some of the details, doubt the practicalities, or debate the probity and realism of these responses, but the major message comes through clearly: the felonious activities of these men will not suffer for lack of the appropriate armament. Their intent, so far as we can tell, would be to find substitutes that may be inconvenient but nevertheless highly effective.

Perhaps the most telling implication of our data on weapons substitution is not in the substance of the results but in the more general lesson that any social policy can have consequences that no one foresaw, intended, or wanted--consequences that, under the right conditions, worsen rather than improve the problem being addressed. Clearly, this study has not "solved" the problem of gun crime in American society; indeed, it has not even showed much about what the solution would look like. But it has attempted to provide some information about the nature and dimensions of the problem, information that we hope others will find useful in formulating workable solutions.

39. Most of what is so far known about the effects of mandatory sentencing for gun use is derived from studies of the Bartley-Fox amendment in Massachusetts; see Beha (1977), Deutsch and Alt (1977), and Pierce and Bowers (1981). Some assessment of the Detroit version has also been undertaken; see Loftin and McDowall (1981). None of these studies suggests dramatic effects on the violent crime rate, least of all over the long run.

# Bibliography


**Allen, John**
1977 Assault with a Deadly Weapon: The Autobiography of a Street Criminal. New York: McGraw Hill.

**Balkin, Steven, and John MacDonald**
1984 "A market analysis for handguns and gun control issues." Ch. 10 (pp. 259-298) in Don B. Kates (ed.), Firearms and Violence: Issues of Public Policy. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing.

**Beha, James A.**
1977 "'And Nobody Can Get You Out.' The impact of a mandatory prison sentence for the illegal carrying of a firearm on the use of firearms and on the administration of criminal justice in Boston." Parts I and II. Boston University Law Review 57:1 (January), 96-146; and 57:2 (March), 289-333.

**Brill, Steven**
1977 Firearms Abuse. Washington, DC: The Police Foundation.

**Bruce-Biggs, B.**
1976 "The great American gun war." The Public Interest 45:37-62.

**Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms**
1976a Project Identification: A Study of Handguns Used in Crime. Washington, DC: BATF.

1976b Project 300. Washington, DC: BATF.

**Burr, D. E. S.**
1977 Handgun Regulation. Orlando, FL: Florida Bureau of Criminal Justice Planning and Assistance.

**Cambridge Reports, Inc.**
1978 An Analysis of Public Attitudes Toward Handgun Control. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Reports, Inc.

**Chaiken, Jan M., and Marcia R. Chaiken**
1982 Varieties of Criminal Behavior. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation.

**Cook, Philip J.**
1976 "A strategic choice analysis of robbery." Pp. 173-187 in Wesley Skogan (ed.), Sample Surveys of the Victims of Crime. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

1979 "The effect of gun availability on robbery and robbery murder: a cross-sectional study of fifty cities." Pp. 743-781 in Robert Haveman and Bruce Zellner (eds.), Policy Studies Review Annual. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

1980 "Reducing injury and death rates in robbery." Policy Analysis 6:1 (Winter): 21-45.

1981 "The role of firearms in violent crime: An interpretative review of the literature..." Duke University: Institute of Policy Sciences and Public Affairs. Pp. 91 (mimeo'd).

1982 "Research on robbery: An analysis of existing literature and an assessment of future research needs." Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Pp. 65.

1983 "Robbery in the United States: An analysis of recent trends and patterns." Duke University: Institute of Policy Sciences and Public Affairs. Pp. 49 (mimeo'd).

**Cook, Philip J., and Daniel Nagin**
1979 Does the Weapon Matter? Washington, DC: Institute for Law and Social Research.

**Decision-Making Information, Inc.**
1978 Attitudes of the American Electorate Toward Gun Control. Santa Ana, CA: DMI, Inc.

**Deutsch, Stephen J., and Francis B. Alt**
1977 "The effect of Massachusetts' gun control law on gun-related crimes in the city of Boston." Evaluation Quarterly 1 (March): 543-568.

**Flanagan, Timothy J., David J. van Alstyne, and Michael R. Gottfredson**
1981 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

**Hindelang, Michael, Michael Gottfredson, and James Garofalo**
1978 Victims of Personal Crime: An Empirical Foundation for a Theory of Personal Victimization. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

**Inciardi, James A. (ed.)**
1981 The Drugs-Crime Connection. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

**Kates, Don B.**
1978 "Some remarks on the prohibition of handguns." St. Louis University Law Journal 23:11, pp. 11-34.

1984 Firearms and Violence: Issues of Public Policy. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

**Kleck, Gary**
1983 "Policy lessons from recent gun control research." To appear in Law and Contemporary Problems.

1984a "The relationship between gun ownership levels and rates of violence in the United States." Ch. 5 (pp. 99-132) in Kates (ed.), Firearms and Violence: Issues of Public Policy. Camrbidge, MA: Ballinger.

1984b "Handgun control only: A policy disaster in the making." Ch. 7 (Pp. 167-199) in Kates (ed.), ibid.

**Lizotte, Alan J., and David Bordua**
1980 "Firearms ownership for sport and protection: two divergent models." American Sociological Review 45:2 (April), 229-244.

**Lizotte, Alan J., David Bordua, and Carolyn White**
1981 "Firearms ownership for sport and protection: two not so divergent models." American Sociological Review 46:4 (August), 499-503.

**Loftin, Colin, and David McDowall**
1981 "'One with a gun gets you two': Mandatory sentencing and firearms violence in Detroit." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 455 (May), pp. 150-167.

**Marquis, Kent H.**
1981 Quality of Prisoner Self Reports: Arrest and Conviction Response Errors. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation.

**Moore, Mark**
1981 "Keeping handguns from criminal offenders." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 455 (May), pp. 92-109.

**National Bureau of Standards**
1977 LEAA Police Equipment Survey of 1972. Vol. VI: Body Armor and Confiscated Weapons. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.

**Newton, George D., and Franklin E. Zimring**
1969 Firearms and Violence in American Life. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

**Pierce, Glenn L., and William J. Bowers**
1981 "The Bartley-Fox gun law's short term impact on crime in Boston." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 455 (May), pp. 120-137.

**Rossi, Peter H.**
1983 "On crime and criminal justice." Chancellor's Lecture: University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

**Rossi, Peter H., Richard A. Berk, and Kenneth Lenihan**
1980 Money, Work, and Crime. New York: Academic Press.

**Wolfgang, Marvin**
1980 National Survey of Crime Severity. University of Pennsylvania: Center for Studies in Criminology and Criminal Law.

**Wright, James D., Peter H. Rossi. and Kathy Daly**
1983 Under the Gun: Weapons, Crime, and Violence in America. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine.

**Zimring, Franklin E.**
1968 "Is gun control likely to reduce violent killings?" The University of Chicago Law Review 35: 721-737.

1972 "The medium is the message: firearm caliber as a determinant of death from assault." Journal of Legal Studies 1:1, pp. 97-123.