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## How Delinquent Youths Acquire Guns: Initial Versus Most Recent Gun Acquisitions

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**ABSTRACT** Background. *Access to firearms among delinquent youths poses significant risks to community safety. The purpose of the study was to describe how a group of criminally involved youths obtained guns.*

Methods. *Youths were randomly selected from a juvenile justice facility to participate in a semistructured, anonymous interview. Transcripts were coded and analyzed with the aid of textual analysis software.*

Results. *Of the 45 participants, 30 had acquired at least 1 gun prior to their most recent incarceration, and 22 had acquired multiple guns. About half of the first gun acquisitions were gifts or finds. The first guns youths acquired were usually obtained from friends or family. The most recent acquisitions were often new, high-caliber guns, and they came from acquaintances or drug addicts. New guns often came from high-volume traffickers. Gun acquisitions from strangers or through "straw purchases" were rare. Though few obtained guns directly through theft, some youths believed their supplier had stolen guns. Youths rarely left their community to obtain a gun.*

Conclusions. *Guns were readily available to this sample of criminally involved youths through their social networks. Efforts to curtail high-volume, illegal gun traffickers and to recover discarded guns from areas in which illicit drug sales take place could potentially reduce gun availability to high-risk youth.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Firearm mortality rates among males aged 15–24 years are eight times higher in the United States than in other high-income countries.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, young males also have the highest rates of homicide offending among age-gender subgroups,<sup>2</sup> and about three quarters of all homicides involving male offenders less than 25 years of age are committed with firearms.<sup>3</sup>

There is some evidence that the higher rate of gun homicide among youths in the United States is partly attributable to greater accessibility of guns.<sup>4</sup> Although youth gun carrying appears to have declined recently, 1 in 10 male high school students in 1997 reported having carried a gun during the past 30 days.<sup>5</sup> The preva-

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lence of gun carrying is much higher in selected samples of incarcerated youth,<sup>6-9</sup> and was as high as 84% in the largest study of incarcerated youths.<sup>9</sup>

For many years, it was commonly assumed that little could be done about delinquent youths' access to firearms. But, there are recent, apparently successful, examples of law enforcement agencies using data from traces of recovered crime guns to strategically combat gun trafficking to youth.<sup>10,11</sup>

While gun tracing data provide some insight into the illicit gun market, tracing data are limited in their ability to describe how crime-involved youths obtain guns because traces typically end with the first retail purchase from a licensed gun dealer. Confidential, anonymous surveys of criminally involved youths provide perhaps the most complete source of information about how high-risk youths obtain guns. The largest previous study of this type used data from self-administered surveys in seven juvenile detention facilities and found that purchases were the most common means by which youths acquired their most recent handgun, followed by an "other" category and theft.<sup>6</sup> Friends were the most common source of guns obtained by incarcerated youths. "Street sources" and "drug-related sources" were the next most common sources; however, the relationship between the youths and these sources was unclear.

Previous research did not answer important questions about the sources of guns for high-risk youths, such as whether the source sold a lot of guns and how youths view different potential sources of guns. Many delinquent youths acquire multiple guns over the course of their adolescent years. However, with one exception,<sup>7</sup> previous studies only considered the most recently acquired firearm and ignored the important initial acquisition.

In our recent study, we examined factors that criminally involved youths reported prevented or postponed their acquisition and carrying of guns.<sup>12</sup> The current study used data from this same project to examine how criminally involved youths acquired guns and addressed the gaps in current research described above.

## **METHODS**

### **Study Population**

Youths were randomly selected from a residential juvenile justice facility for males in Maryland. Residents of the facility were enrolled in one of two programs: a short-stay program for youths who, for the most part, have not previously been incarcerated and a program for the most serious offenders in the Maryland juvenile justice system. To be eligible for the study, youths had to be 14 to 18 years of age, available at the time of interview, and able to provide informed assent/consent.

### **Study Procedures**

Youths selected for recruitment were told that their participation was voluntary, that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous, and that their treatment at the facility would be unaffected by their decision about whether or not to participate. The researchers did not have access to the subjects' names at any point in the study.

In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted from January to May 1998. Each interview involved one interviewer (L.F.), a note taker, and a youth respondent. The interviews were not audiotaped to maintain the anonymity of participants. The note taker transcribed the interview notes, usually within 24 hours

of the interview. The transcripts were then promptly proofread for accuracy and then coded using NUD\*IST, a qualitative software package used for managing and analyzing textual data.<sup>13</sup>

### **Instrument**

The interview guide consisted of mostly open-ended questions about experiences and attitudes about guns. The items of particular interest for this study included questions about the source and manner of acquisition for the respondent's first gun and most recent gun and the characteristics of those guns. Questions were also asked about respondents' age, race, place of residence, and involvement in delinquent activities, such as drug dealing, exposure to violence, and weapon use. Given the qualitative nature of this study, the wording and order of the questions varied slightly as the interviews proceeded. As a result, not all questions were asked of each youth.

### **Analysis**

Two researchers read through the transcripts and independently assigned codes to each separate idea. Interrater differences were discussed and resolved. Portions of the text that contained the same codes were examined together, which aided the identification of recurrent themes. Analyses focused on responses that interviewees clearly indicated were based on actual experiences and excluded discussion of hypothetical situations.

## **RESULTS**

### **Participant Characteristics**

Of the 46 eligible youths who were selected, 45 agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 25 were from the short-term program, and 20 were from the longer-term program. Participant ages ranged from 14 to 18 years, with a mean of 16.2 years. Two thirds (30/45) of the respondents were black, 22% (10/45) were white, and 11% (5/45) were either of mixed or another race. These proportions are roughly representative of the racial distribution of the facility's residents. Of the respondents, 61% (27/44) lived in a large city prior to their incarceration. There were 43% (18/42) who reported using a gun to threaten or shoot at someone, and two thirds (30/44) had been threatened or harmed by a weapon.

Two thirds (30/45) of the respondents had acquired at least one firearm prior to their most recent incarceration, and nearly half (21/45) had acquired multiple guns (Table 1). (One respondent reported that his parents gave him a shotgun, but he returned it after firing it once. This respondent was excluded from subsequent analyses of youths who had acquired guns because his experience with guns was different from that of other youths.) Of those who had ever owned a gun, the average number of guns ever owned was 3.1, and one youth reported having owned 11 guns.

### **Initial Gun Acquisition**

The mean age of initial gun acquisition was 13.7 years and ranged from 11 to 16 years. Respondents usually acquired their first gun in one of three ways: purchases, gifts, and by finding them (Table 1). The most common manner of respondents' initial gun acquisition was a cash purchase or a trade for drugs (45%, 13/29). Only one youth reported that he stole his first gun.

**TABLE 1. Means of acquisition for initial and most recent guns by criminally involved youths**

	Initial gun acquisition		
	Total sample (n = 29)	Those with multi- ple acquisitions (n = 21)	Most recent gun acquisition (n = 21)
<b>Means of acquisition</b>			
Purchase or trade	13 (45%)	8 (38%)	18 (86%)
Found	7 (24%)	5 (24%)	1 (5%)
Gift	8 (28%)	8 (38%)	1 (5%)
Stole	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)
<b>Youth's search for guns</b>			
Passive	14 (48%)	10 (48%)	7 (33%)
Probably passive	2 (7%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)
Mutual	1 (3%)	1 (5%)	4 (19%)
Active	9 (31%)	5 (24%)	7 (33%)
Question not asked	3 (10%)	3 (14%)	2 (10%)

In about half (14/29) of first gun acquisitions, the youth indicated that he was not in search of a gun when one came into his possession, and only 31% (9/29) clearly indicated that they were actively seeking a gun at the time (Table 1). In the remaining cases, the degree to which the youth was actively seeking a gun or passively accepted a gun was unclear, or the question was not asked. These passive gun acquisitions by youths were gifts or instances in which the gun was found. Youths reported finding guns in alleys, in parks, and behind liquor stores. As one youth recounted, "I found it [a revolver] in a park. It's this park where they're always finding bodies, guns. Someone gets chased in there by the police, so they dump the gun."

When youths were given their first gun, the gun usually came from a close family member or a friend who thought the youth needed it for protection. The following quotation describes how one respondent acquired his first gun:

I got it [first gun] from my cousin. My cousin, he sells guns and he sells drugs on the side. I told him, "I got robbed." He was like, "Did you get 'em?" "No. I didn't have no gun or nothin." "I told you, you should've got a gun." He took me back inside the alley. He had a stash [of] about 15–20 guns and said, "Which ones you want?"

Although youths who were given their first gun reported that they did not seek out the guns that came into their possession, some indicated that they had contemplated getting a gun before their serendipitous acquisition. As one youth responded when asked whether he was looking for a gun when he first acquired one, "No. I just said if one comes across, I get it. I just liked it."

When a youth's first gun was purchased, friends and acquaintances were typically the source. Only two youths said they bought their first gun from a drug addict, and no respondent reported buying his first gun from a total stranger (Table 2).

Licensed gun dealers were not the most proximal source for any of the first gun acquisitions, nor did any of the first gun acquisitions involve a "straw purchase," in

**TABLE 2. Sources of guns youths received through purchases, trades, and gifts**

	Initial gun acquisition		
	Total sample (n = 21)	Those with multi- ple acquisitions (n = 16)	Most recent gun acquisition (n = 19)
From whom gun was acquired			
Family	4 (19%)	4 (25%)	0
Friend	7 (33%)	6 (38%)	6 (32%)
Acquaintance	5 (24%)	1 (6%)	5 (26%)
Friend of friend or of family	3 (14%)	3 (19%)	2 (11%)
Drug addict	2 (10%)	2 (13%)	5 (26%)
Stranger	0	0	1 (5%)
Supplier sold a lot of guns			
Yes	6 (29%)	5 (31%)	5 (26%)
Probably	3 (14%)	2 (13%)	3 (16%)
Probably not	3 (14%)	2 (13%)	2 (11%)
No	3 (14%)	2 (13%)	1 (5%)
Not asked/refused	6 (29%)	5 (31%)	8 (42%)

which a person proscribed from legally buying guns enlists an eligible buyer to purchase a gun for him. Nevertheless, many of the sources apparently had access to a large supply of guns. Of the respondents who bought or were given their first gun, 43% (9/21) reported that their gun source sold a lot of guns (Table 2).

Most of the first guns acquired by respondents fired low- or medium-caliber ammunition and were thought to be used guns (Table 3). Of those who purchased their first gun and reported the price paid, more than half (7/12) paid less than \$100. Considering that more than half of all the first guns were found by the youth or were gifts, only 17% (5/29) of all initial gun acquisitions involved a youth paying more than \$100 for a gun (data not shown).

**TABLE 3. Characteristics of guns acquired by criminally involved youths**

	Initial gun acquisition		
	Total sample (n = 30)*	Those with multi- ple acquisitions (n = 22)*	Most recent gun acquisition (n = 21)
Type of gun acquired			
Small-caliber handgun (.22, .25, .32)	13 (43%)	10 (45%)	1 (5%)
Medium-caliber handgun (.38, .380)	12 (40%)	9 (41%)	10 (48%)
Large-caliber handgun (.357 magnum, 9 mm, .45)	4 (13%)	2 (9%)	7 (33%)
Shotgun	1 (3%)	1 (5%)	3 (14%)
New versus used gun			
New/probably new	7 (23%)	7 (32%)	12 (57%)
Used/probably used	16 (53%)	11 (50%)	7 (33%)
Not asked	7 (23%)	4 (18%)	2 (10%)

\*One respondent acquired two guns at his first acquisition.

**Most Recent Gun Acquisition**

Used, small-caliber handguns that cost little or no money were generally acceptable to youths who had previously not owned a gun. But, many gun-involved youths eventually became more selective and sought new medium- and high-caliber, high-capacity semiautomatic pistols for their most recent acquisitions. Among youths who had acquired more than one gun ( $n = 22$ ), only 1 of the most recently obtained firearms was a low-caliber gun compared with 10 of the first guns. A third (7/21) of the most recently acquired guns were high-caliber handguns compared with just 9% (2/22) of first guns (Table 3).

Respondents believed the gun they acquired was new in 57% (12/21) of the most recent acquisitions, in contrast with 32% (7/22) of the first acquisitions. The preference for new guns was reflected in the higher street prices paid for new guns compared with used guns. As one youth explained when discussing his purchase of a 9-mm Ruger pistol from someone who sold lots of guns, "It was fresh out of the box. On the corner that would sell for about \$100 if fired, but since it was fresh out of the box, it would be \$200 to \$300." As a result of the shift to new, high-caliber guns, 38% (8/21) of the most recent gun acquisitions involved purchases in excess of \$200, compared with only 7% (2/29) of the initial gun acquisitions (data not shown).

New guns tended to be sold by individuals who the youth believed to be a gun trafficker, that is, someone who sells a lot of guns. Some youths sought out gun traffickers for their most recent guns if they were looking for a particular type of gun. A youth who was looking for a Ruger semiautomatic pistol that "looked like Robocop's gun" explained, "Some people have got connections. You can order them [guns]."

Consistent with the increased selectivity of youths in their most recent gun acquisitions, these recent acquisitions were less likely than the initial acquisitions to be gifts or finds (2/21 vs. 12/21), and were more likely to involve gun-seeking behavior on the part of the youth (11/21 vs. 6/21). Youths seeking guns were usually able to obtain guns directly from sources in or near the communities in which they lived. In only a few instances did youths report going out of state or purchasing from a source who went out of state to get a gun. One youth reported that his friend buys guns in another state to decrease the likelihood that Maryland authorities can trace the gun to him. Another youth reported driving to another state to obtain an assault pistol that was banned for sale in Maryland.

**Other Findings**

Some youths reported paying amounts that were likely to be well below retail for what they believed to be new guns. Drug addicts were often the source of discounted guns, and some youths talked about bargaining with drug addicts to obtain a significant discount. One youth said he paid a junkie \$20 for an apparently new and powerful .45-caliber handgun. Another said he had paid a drug addict \$30 for a new .25-caliber handgun. In these and other transactions with drug addicts, the youths reported that the addicts approached them with enticing guns at very low prices rather than the youths seeking out the addicts.

In contrast, guns acquired from individuals who youths believed sold a lot of guns were likely to sell the guns at much higher prices (\$250 to \$900). Many youths were willing to pay higher prices because these illegal gun traffickers could usually provide the new, high-powered guns that were in high demand.

Although straw purchases are believed to be a common manner by which juve-

niles and criminals obtain guns, only 3 of the more than 50 gun acquisitions described by respondents in the study involved the juvenile instigating a straw purchase from a licensed gun dealer.

Although theft was rarely a direct means of acquisition for the first gun or the most recently acquired gun, several youths described incidents in which guns were stolen in street robberies, home burglaries, and thefts from cars. In addition, some youths mentioned that their gun source had acquired guns through theft. Two youths mentioned a source who had reputedly stolen large quantities of guns and was trafficking the stolen guns.

## DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous research,<sup>6-10</sup> we found firearms were readily accessible, although not always instantaneously, among the crime-involved youths in our study. Of every 10 respondents, 7 had possessed a gun at one time, and half had owned multiple guns.

The youths in our study typically obtained their guns from people they knew, either directly or indirectly through a mutual friend. Some youths reported that they would only buy or borrow a gun from a small circle of trusted friends and family members.<sup>12</sup> As more law enforcement agencies begin to question youths arrested on gun charges about where they obtained their guns,<sup>11</sup> this research serves as a potential reality check. If our data are reasonably generalizable, police should be suspicious of claims that a youth acquired a gun from a total stranger.

Some youths reportedly paid as little as \$20 for their first gun, and most paid less than \$100. In their study of incarcerated youth, Sheley and Wright<sup>6</sup> also found street prices for handguns to be low relative to retail prices. Based on these low prices and their finding that more than half of the delinquent youths had ever stolen a firearm, Sheley and Wright inferred that a large share of guns acquired by delinquent youths had previously been stolen. Yet, we found relatively low prices paid for many guns despite theft being a much less common method of direct gun acquisition in the sample of incarcerated youths we studied.

The low price paid for many of the youths' first guns may also reflect relatively low demand for low-caliber, used handguns. In discussing their most recent gun purchases, many youths indicated a strong preference for new, medium- and high-caliber, high-capacity pistols and were willing to pay significantly more and tolerate additional inconveniences (e.g., longer waits, more extensive search for suppliers) to obtain these guns. The most common reason respondents offered for their preference for new guns was to avoid the risk of having a gun that could be linked to other crimes.<sup>12</sup> New guns were also perceived to be less likely to jam than used guns, a factor that was very important to some youths.

This strong preference for new guns has important policy implications. First, new guns are much easier than older guns to trace to individuals potentially responsible for illegally selling guns to juveniles.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, newer guns were often obtained from individuals who sold a lot of guns. While there is uncertainty about what youths perceived as "a lot of guns" and whether those perceptions are accurate, interdiction efforts that focus on the newest guns may be more likely to lead to sources that supply relatively large quantities of guns used in crime. After new guns are diverted to the illegal market, they can subsequently be transferred to juveniles and criminals multiple times via private transactions, theft, or finds and thus may be used in multiple shootings over time. Therefore, concentrating criminal

justice resources on the sources of crime guns that are relatively new may have a greater long-term impact on public safety due to the longer “life span” of new guns within the illicit market as compared with older guns.

Recent longitudinal research indicates that once an adolescent begins to carry a concealed handgun, this practice tends to persist throughout the high-risk period of adolescence and young adulthood.<sup>14</sup> Thus, preventing early acquisition of firearms among high-risk youths could decrease the rate of firearm violence perpetrated by youths throughout adolescence and young adulthood. We found that initial gun acquisitions differed from the most recent acquisitions in many respects. While the most recent gun acquisitions generally involved youths seeking new guns, about half of the initial gun acquisitions were passively accepted as gifts and finds. Some youths reported finding their first gun in or near drug markets. This is not surprising because individuals involved in illicit drug sales commonly have guns.<sup>15</sup> Youths often reported stashing their guns close to where they were selling drugs to avoid enhanced prison sentences for possessing a gun during the commission of a drug crime.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, police searches in and around open-air drug markets, or in other areas where suspects have been pursued by the police, may lead to many gun seizures from high-risk settings.

The qualitative nature of this study helped deepen our understanding of the sources and methods used by delinquent youths to acquire guns. However, the relatively small sample drawn from a single facility and the semistructured nature of the data collection limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the population studied. Police data on the types of guns recovered from youths in Baltimore,<sup>16</sup> however, are consistent with the types of guns reported in this sample. Our findings concerning the source and manner of gun acquisition, prices paid, and strong preferences for new, high-powered guns are generally consistent with previous research.<sup>6-9</sup>

While we believe the findings accurately reflect the experiences of the delinquent youths we interviewed, access to firearms among nondelinquent youths living in the same communities may be quite different.<sup>6</sup> Many youths in our study acquired guns through their contacts with others involved in illegal activities, and several stated that they would only buy a gun from someone they knew and trusted.<sup>12</sup> Nondelinquent youths who want a gun but are not part of such networks may not be able to obtain a gun as easily as did the criminally involved youths in our study.

Most research on adolescent gun acquisition is limited to the most proximate source of guns for youths. This can mask the importance of intermediaries who are key to the supply of guns to juveniles and criminals in the illegal gun market. While our study also has this limitation, we did gather data on whether the gun acquired was new or used and whether the direct supplier sold a lot of guns. As explained above, this new information is important for formulating gun policies and enforcement strategies. To more fully understand the workings of illicit gun markets that supply guns to youths, additional research is needed that traces guns from their initial retail sales through any intermediaries and ultimately to youth possession and crime involvement.

This study was conducted of youths in Maryland, a state with moderately high levels of regulations on gun sales, several of which were introduced less than 2 years prior to the period of data collection. Recent research indicates that states with the most restrictive gun sales laws have a much larger proportion of their crime guns that originate from out-of-state gun dealers than do states with less



restrictive laws.<sup>17</sup> Street prices for firearms in places with very restrictive gun sales laws are also higher than in places with weaker laws.<sup>18</sup> Thus, costs and difficulty of obtaining illegal guns may be significantly different in places with very strict gun sales laws, with interstate gun traffickers playing a more significant role. Further research is needed to determine whether restrictive gun laws and law enforcement initiatives to combat illegal gun trafficking successfully reduce gun availability to high-risk youth.

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