



Sources of guns to dangerous people: What we learn by asking them



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ABSTRACT

Gun violence exacts a lethal toll on public health. This paper focuses on reducing access to firearms by dangerous offenders, contributing original empirical data on the gun transactions that arm offenders in Chicago. Conducted in the fall of 2013, analysis of an open-ended survey of 99 inmates of Cook County Jail focuses on a subset of violence-prone individuals with the goal of improving law enforcement actions.

Among our principal findings:

*Our respondents (adult offenders living in Chicago or nearby) obtain most of their guns from their social network of personal connections. Rarely is the proximate source either direct purchase from a gun store, or theft.

*Only about 60% of guns in the possession of respondents were obtained by purchase or trade. Other common arrangements include sharing guns and holding guns for others.

*About one in seven respondents report selling guns, but in only a few cases as a regular source of income.

*Gangs continue to play some role in Chicago in organizing gun buys and in distributing guns to members as needed.

*The Chicago Police Department has a considerable effect on the workings of the underground gun market through deterrence. Transactions with strangers and less-trusted associates are limited by concerns over arrest risk (if the buyer should happen to be an undercover officer or a snitch), and about being caught with a “dirty” gun (one that has been fired in a crime).

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Introduction

Gun violence imposes a lethal toll on public health (Hemenway, 2006; Dahlberg and Mercy, 2009; Hemenway and Miller, 2013). In assaults that result in injury, the use of a gun rather than other commonly-used weapons increases case-fatality rates by more than a factor of ten (Zimring, 1968, 1972; Cook, 1991).¹ Reducing gun use in violent crime would save lives.

Law enforcement in general, and the police in particular, have lead responsibility to combat gun crime and thus to prevent gunshot injuries. Attention to social and policy determinants of health requires the public health community to explore the efficacy of law enforcement approaches to violence prevention. Evidence-based policing against gun misuse is surely no less important from a public health perspective than, say, evidence-based emergency medical response to gunshot cases.

Among the broad policy approaches to reducing gun use in violent crime are (1) to deter criminal uses of guns, including illegal carrying, brandishing, and firing, through the targeted use of law enforcement resources and (2) to reduce gun availability to dangerous people by enforcing regulations intended to restrict transfer of guns to those who are prohibited from possessing them. These two domains of law-enforcement action may be identified respectively with “demand” and “supply,” although it may be more precise to identify them as “use” and “access” (Wellford et al., 2004; Cook and Ludwig, 2006).

This paper focuses on the latter approach of curtailing supply and thereby reducing access by dangerous offenders. Our original empirical contribution is to provide new data on gun transactions that arm offenders in Chicago, with the goal of providing information useful in refining law-enforcement tactics. The data are from an open-ended survey of 99 inmates of Cook County Jail, conducted in fall, 2013. It should be emphasized that while generally law abiding people own most guns in the United States, we are focused on the relatively small subset of gun possessors who are prone to criminal violence.

A recent report of the National Academy of Sciences identified the “...pressing need to obtain up-to-date, accurate information about how many guns are owned in the United States, their distribution and types, how people acquire them, and how they are used (Leshner et al., 2013).” To that end, the panel recommended that research be

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¹ In 2013, the case fatality rate for assault cases treated in the hospital and involving cutting or piercing injuries was 1.2%. The case fatality rate for such cases involving gunshot wounds was 15.3%. The ratio is 12.7. Figures computed from on-line data available from WISQARS.

conducted to “characterize the scope of and motivations for gun acquisition, ownership, and use, and how they are distributed across subpopulations (p. 4).” Offenders are mentioned as a subpopulation of particular interest.

The Cook County Jail (CCJ) Pilot Survey addresses this need by providing information on illicit firearm transactions by offenders with records of violence and gang involvement. The pilot survey included questions on guns to which the respondents had access during the six months prior to their arrest and incarceration, with a particular focus on the type, source, and nature of the transaction that provided access to the respondent. The survey was conducted as a structured conversation. It provides some sense of the variety of circumstances and arrangements by which dangerous people become armed in Chicago.

The CCJ Pilot Survey is by no means the first survey of offenders to ask about gun transactions. The US Department of Justice has conducted surveys of state and federal prisoners, as well as arrestees, that include relevant items.² Several one-shot surveys are also reported in the literature (e.g., Wright and Rossi, 1986). The CCJ Pilot Survey, like previous surveys, demonstrates that a large percentage of respondents are willing to provide information about (mainly-illegal) gun transactions. Results from CCJ inmates are generally consistent with those of comparable surveys of offender populations. While not all respondents give truthful responses, and some refuse to respond at all, we believe that the information generated from this type of survey provides a reasonably accurate characterization of the “retail” aspect of Chicago’s underground gun market. Due to small sample size ($n = 99$) and limitations of the open-ended survey method, our characterization is more qualitative than quantitative. It is deemed a “pilot” survey in that it was intended to inform the development of a subsequent closed-ended offender survey.

Regulatory context and results of other surveys on gun markets

Gun commerce is primarily regulated by the federal Gun Control Act of 1968,³ which stipulates that those in the business of manufacturing, importing, or selling guns must have a federal license (Zimring, 1975). Only those with federal firearms licenses (FFLs) may receive direct interstate shipments of guns. So with few exceptions, the supply chain of new guns is characterized by transfers between licensees, up to and including the first retail sale. Federal regulations require that before an FFL may transfer a gun to a customer, the customer must show identification and fill out a 4473 form that states that he or she is not disqualified from owning a gun due to a felony conviction or one of nine other conditions. State regulations may also apply, and FFL retailers are obligated to follow them. The dealer conducts a background check which accesses state and federal databases to confirm lack of disqualification, and then transfers the gun (Ludwig and Cook, 2000). The dealer is required to keep the 4473 form on file and to show it to federal investigators when asked.

Guns are durable, and there is an active retail market for used guns. In some cases, resales are through a licensed gun dealer, which must again follow federal rules governing transactions. But resales between unlicensed individuals (often called “private transactions”) are only loosely regulated by federal law, with one main exception – a gun cannot be shipped directly to an out-of-state purchaser unless that person has a retail license.⁴ Federal law also bans a knowing transfer to someone who is disqualified due to criminal record or other factors.⁵

Fig. 1 presents a schematic representation of one gun’s possible transaction history. This scheme illustrates the fact that guns may change hands several times following the first sale by an FFL, and that

some of those subsequent transactions, while typically not documented, may be legal (depending on state and local regulations). Those secondary transactions may include private sales (possibly at a gun show or through the internet), gifts to family members, a consignment sale through an FFL, or a collateral arrangement with a licensed pawnbroker. At some point, a transaction – possibly a theft or a sale – may transfer the gun to the hands of someone who is proscribed from gun possession due to criminal record or age. Subsequent transactions may then move the gun among other offenders, until it is ultimately lost or confiscated by the police.

Seventeen states, including Illinois, impose some regulation on private transfers that goes beyond the federal requirements (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2012; Wintemute, 2013). In Illinois, anyone who acquires a gun from any source must have a Firearm Owners Identification card (FOID), and as of 2013, anyone who transfers a gun privately must keep a record of that transfer for ten years (Illinois State Police Firearms Services Bureau, 2014). The City of Chicago imposes additional restrictions: together with Washington, D.C., it has been the most tightly regulated city in the nation. Chicago essentially banned residents from keeping handguns in city limits from 1982 to 2010, and now requires that handguns be registered. At the time of this Article, there are still no retail dealers in the city limits. So Chicago residents who want to shop at a gun store must travel to the suburbs or elsewhere (Bosman, 2014; Byrne and Ruthhart, 2014).

Without enforcement, regulations are bound to be ineffective. The Chicago Police Department has made gun enforcement a priority since the 1950s (Cook et al., 2007). Among other programs, the Chicago Police conduct regular undercover gun buys to help make a case against unlicensed dealers; trace all crime guns that they recover to determine the first retail source; and use a ballistics imaging system to match shells (usually picked up at crime scenes) to particular firearms.⁶ These practices are known to criminals and affect their behavior, as documented below.

National firearms surveys of offenders

As documented below, survey evidence provides strong evidence that the gun market is sharply differentiated by the characteristics of the individual who is seeking a gun. Adults who are entitled to possess a gun are more likely than not to buy from an FFL. On the other hand, those who are disqualified by age or criminal history are most likely to obtain their guns in off-the-books transactions, often from social connections such as family and acquaintances, or from “street” sources such as illicit brokers or drug dealers. While some of these illicit transactions are purchases, they also take a variety of other forms.

Documentation for sources of guns to the US public at large comes from a detailed national survey conducted in 1994 (Cook and Ludwig, 1996) known as the National Survey of Private Ownership of Firearms (NSPOF).⁷ Based on the NSPOF, it appears that about

⁶ The Chicago Police Department (CPD) and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) currently participate in the CPD/ATF Firearms Joint Gun Trafficking Task Force, the objective of which is to conduct investigations into the source of crime guns recovered in Chicago (City of Chicago, 2014). The task force, working alongside CPD’s Chicago Anti-Gun Enforcement (CAGE) unit, undertakes regular undercover buys. Given the sensitive nature of undercover buys, we reference three 2013–2014 publically available investigations into crime gun sources involving explicit undercover gun purchasing (ATF, 2014a, 2014b). In April 2013 CPD conducted “five separate undercover gun purchases, buying a total of nine firearms” (Sun-Times Media Wire, 2013). Further, CPD since April 2013 has maintained an on-site ballistics laboratory to generate ballistics images from recovered crime guns with a response time of 4 h after data entry (Main, 2014; City of Chicago, 2012). The ballistics image matches to prior crimes are regularly conducted according to discussion with high-ranking law enforcement officials involved with the National Integrated Ballistics Imaging Network (NIBIN) in Chicago. Prior to April 2013, ATF’s Chicago office conducted Chicago ballistics imaging in coordination with the Illinois State Police (ISP).

⁷ A similar survey was conducted in 2004 (Hepburn et al., 2007).

² Several of these surveys are analyzed in the next section.

³ Gun Control Act of 1968, Pub. L. No. 90-618, 82 Stat. 1213 (1968) (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. §§ 921–28 (2012)).

⁴ 18 U.S.C. § 922 (b) (3) (2012).

⁵ Id. § 922 (d); 27 C.F.R. § 478.32.

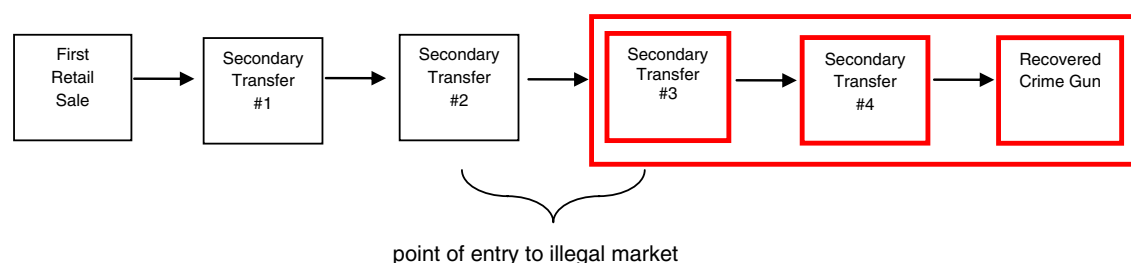


Fig. 1. Supply chain of guns to crime.

60% of recently acquired guns had been purchased from an FFL (Cook and Ludwig, 1996, 2013).

There have been three large-scale periodic surveys of offenders conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice at various times since 1972. The Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities (SISCF) was fielded most recently in 2004, as was the Survey of Inmates in Federal Correctional Facilities (SIFCF); the Survey of Inmates in Local Jails (SILJ) was fielded most recently in 2002. Detailed statistics computed from the most recent version of each survey are presented in an appendix. These computations are limited to respondents sentenced in the previous two years, and are limited to male inmates between the ages of 18 and 40.

The results can be briefly summarized. The state prisoner survey is largest and is the focus here, although it is reassuring that the results from the other two surveys are similar. First, it is rare for offenders to obtain their guns directly from the formal market: Only 10% of recently incarcerated state prison inmates who carried a gun indicate that they purchased that gun from a licensed dealer (gun store or pawnbroker). Rather, most of the transactions (70%) are with social connections (friends and family) or with “street” sources. The latter may include fences, drug dealers, brokers who sell guns, and gangs. It should be noted that “street” sources are not necessarily strangers – the survey questionnaire does not ask.

Cash purchases and trades constitute about half of all transactions. About one in six are temporary arrangements involving a gun owned by someone else, and take the form of borrowing, renting, or holding the gun. Perhaps surprisingly, one in ten guns are gifts – but gifting of guns is also quite common in the population at large. Finally, the respondent admits to having stolen the gun in only a small fraction of cases, so it appears that theft is of scant importance as an immediate source of guns to gang members – despite the fact that there are something like 250,000 guns reported stolen each year in the U.S. (Langton, 2012). It should be noted that theft may play a greater role at an earlier stage of moving guns from the licit to the illicit sector.

All three periodic surveys of inmates are restricted to adults age 18 and over. There are no nationally representative surveys of juvenile offenders, although several surveys of convenience samples have been conducted (Sheley and Wright, 1993; Pelucio et al., 2011; Watkins et al., 2008). Juveniles must obtain their guns almost entirely from social connections and other informal sources, possibly including their own household (if adults in the household keep guns). There is suggestive evidence that guns turn over quickly among juvenile offenders (Cook et al., 1995) and that juveniles are likely to obtain their first gun from a family member, but subsequent guns from acquaintances (Webster et al., 2002).

Limits to knowledge

One obvious shortcoming revealed by the review of national surveys is that they are all out of date. The US Department of Justice has not surveyed prison or jail populations for over a decade, nor has there been a comprehensive survey of gun access and use by the American

public. New versions of these surveys are being planned. Yet for now we are faced with a large temporal gap.

A second gap is geographic, and the need for systematic documentation of local gun markets. National patterns may obscure the fact that local gun markets are likely to differ widely due to differences in regulation, and differences in the prevalence of guns. Even timely national data provide an imprecise basis for shaping gun policy in any particular jurisdiction. Chicago, in particular, is an outlier by national standards with respect to the stringency of state and local regulations, and the traditional focus of the police in taking guns off the street.

The Cook County Jail Pilot Survey

The CCJ Pilot Survey was administered during fall, 2013, with the cooperation and support of the Cook County Sheriff's Office, which provided an opportunity to interview a sample of criminally active gun-involved youths in a secure setting.

Participant eligibility and identification

All subjects were between the ages of 18 and 40, males, and detained in Cook County Jail at the time of survey implementation. All eligible individuals had been arrested in Cook County, which encompasses the city of Chicago and immediate suburbs. Individuals charged with firearm possession at the time of arrest, or whose criminal history indicated involvement with guns, were prioritized as participants.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face over several months at Cook County Jail. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed; any information that could identify them that was incidentally mentioned in the course of the interview was redacted. All security procedures were submitted for review and approved by both to the jail authority and the University of Chicago IRB to ensure they comply with jail security and human subject protections.

Risks to the inmate respondents were minimal since the interview was as anonymous as possible – the interviewer was face to face with the respondent but neither she nor the rest of the research team knew his name or was able to match records to individual interviews. The sole benefit to the study participants was a \$10 phone card, identical to those that they receive in payment for work undertaken in the jail.

All told, 138 detainees were invited to participate and 100 gave their (verbal) consent. One woman respondent was included by error, and

Table 1

Most serious charge for invited participants.

Source: Cook County Jail Pilot Survey (2013).

Charges (lead)	N	%
Unlawful use of weapon (felony or misdemeanor) or gun possession	59	42.8
Armed robbery, including vehicular hijacking	30	21.7
Other violent crimes	34	24.6
Other crimes	15	10.9
Total	138	100.0

hence dropped from the final tabulations. The remaining 99 are included in the survey results.

While all of the 138 inmates who were selected by Sheriff's Office had at least one current charge, half had two or more charges. Table 1 divides the sample according to the most serious charge facing each selected inmate. Note that while we have criminal records data for this group of 138, we do not know which of them ended up in the final group of 99 interviewees.

On average, they had been arrested 13 times (including the current arrest) and convicted 2.5 times. There was considerable variation across the sample, ranging from 2 to 54 arrests. Almost all were Black (83%) or Hispanic/Latino (11%), and a majority (57%) were between 18 and 25 years old. Approximately 121 (88%) of the total invited participants were or had been gang affiliated, according to Chicago Police Department records. Gang involvement was also ascertained during the interviews. These responses give a somewhat different picture: of the 93 who answered, 29 denied affiliation, 38 said they were former members, and just 26 admitted to current membership.

The sample can be characterized as a convenience sample of gun-involved, criminally active men living in greater Chicago. It is difficult to say how representative they are of the larger population with that description. For that reason, we do not place much emphasis on the statistical results, as opposed to the qualitative patterns that emerged from these data.

Credibility of survey results

It is reasonable to question the credibility of jail inmates' responses, especially when respondents are being asked to report behavior that is illegal and has not necessarily been detected by authorities. While some respondents refuse to answer relevant questions, and others may distort the truth, there are several arguments for taking the overall patterns that emerge from these surveys seriously. Results from offender surveys are arguably no less reliable than firearms surveys of the general population (Cook and Ludwig, 2015). In our report of results from the CCJ Survey below, we offer comments on the issue of credibility.

Among the reasons to believe what offenders tell us in surveys on gun transactions are the assurances of anonymity during data collection, consistency with known facts, and the credibility of open-ended statements. The assurances in the surveys reported above, and in any credible survey, provide respondents with guarantees of anonymity, stating more or less comprehensively that the authorities will not be able to access their responses and use them in a criminal investigation. Of course respondents may not believe those assurances.

The consistency of responses may be evaluated for each respondent by comparing answers that have some logical relationship. It is also of interest to compare the overall pattern of results from an inmate survey with what we have learned from other sources. For example, the fact that a small percentage of offenders report buying their gun from an FFL is fully in accord with the results of tracing crime guns that have been confiscated by the police to their first retail sale (Cook et al., 2015). Both the survey results and the trace results are imperfect representations of the reality, but the fact that two such distinct sources of data produce results that are qualitatively similar lend support to both.

The credibility of responses to open-ended questions (in surveys where such questions are included) is a subjective matter, but bears comment. In particular, the CCJ Survey was conducted by interviewers who were in a position to make some judgment concerning respondents' veracity and knowledge. A judgment can also be formed from reading the transcript. Generally speaking, with some exceptions, responses appear to be sincere, if sometimes incomplete. The open-ended format also allowed interviewers and readers to form judgments regarding respondents' direct knowledge of matters under discussion. For certain questions, a high proportion of responses included "I don't know," or other cues that the question went beyond the respondent's specific expertise or experience.

It should also be noted that surveys are used to collect sensitive information about a broad range of topics, not just firearms. One domain that has been extensively studied is illicit drug use.

This is a particularly useful parallel because survey responses can often be compared with administrative records and with hair or urine analysis to detect patterns of survey under-reporting (Fendrich et al., 2004).

Diverse empirical studies examine substance use and accompanying disorders among arrestees and prison inmates. Both the Survey of Inmates in Federal Correctional Facilities (SIFCF) and the Survey of Inmates in Local Jails include extensive questions regarding substance use histories (Sevigny et al., 2013), as did one version of the Justice Department's Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (Lu et al., 2001; Webb et al., 2006). While there is evidence of under reporting, these data underscore that many respondents are willing to reveal sensitive information. For example, one-third of state prison and one-quarter of federal prison inmates surveyed in 2004 indicated that they had committed their current offense under the influence of an intoxicating substance (Mumola and Karberg, 2006).

Ultimately the value of self-report data on sensitive topics depends on the intended use. While such data probably yield a downwardly biased estimate of gun involvement and misuse, they may provide a reliable qualitative description of the variety of ways in which offenders obtain their guns. In what follows we validate conclusions whenever possible by comparing results from our survey with those of other surveys and with other sources of data.

Results of CCJ Pilot Survey

The survey consisted of in-person one-on-one interviews conducted by trained interviewers. The interviewers followed a questionnaire (which is included as an appendix), but many prompts were open ended. Interviewers were encouraged to follow-up unclear or incomplete responses, and the tone was quite conversational. The interviews were recorded (voice only), transcribed, and coded.

Each respondent (R) was first asked about guns in his neighborhood: How prevalent were they? Where were they coming from? How easy was it to obtain one? The R was then asked to recall guns that he had access to during the six months prior to being jailed. If the R mentioned more than one gun, then we identified the gun for which he provided the most detail as the "primary" gun. If he provided information on other guns, then they were recorded as "secondary" guns.

Sources of guns to the neighborhood

Most of the 99 respondents offered some account of how guns were getting into their neighborhood, although often prefaced with a statement such as "I don't know." Some Rs were clearly better informed than others. R42 gave a brief lecture that appears quite accurate:

"Several ways actually...there's probably only one gun store that's located throughout the whole city of Chicago which is famous. It's Chuck's Gun Store.... [b]ut as far as Chicago it's so close to Indiana and in Indiana ... there's gun laws but it's easier to get access to guns in Indiana so most people either go to the down-South states or go to Indiana to get guns or people obtain gun licenses, go to the store and then resell."

Our recent research on retail sources of guns recovered by the Chicago Police Department tells a similar story (Cook et al., 2015): of new (less than two years old) guns recovered from gang members, 60% originated from out of state – half in Indiana – and of the remaining 40%, most originated in suburban Cook County, with Chuck's playing a dominant role. (In point of fact, there are no gun stores within the city

limits, but Chuck's is located nearby and is the largest single source of Chicago crime guns.)

Among the themes that showed up in at least five responses each are these:

- * People with an FOID card supply others. R17 opined that "All they need is one person who got a gun card in the 'hood' and everybody got one." R58 noted that people with gun cards buy guns, report them stolen, and then resell them. "That's how we get them personally ourselves."
- * Local people buy guns out of state, sometimes on behalf of gangs. R32: "Six out of 10 times, people go out of state and brings them back." R69: "The gang leaders, they'll choose and pick who to go out and get the guns and bring 'em back." There is also some mention of outsiders who bring guns into the neighborhood, either from other neighborhoods in Chicago, or from out of state. R8: "I know the person, they purchase a lotta guns, it's called a crate" (which are then distributed within "the organization"). R85: "Some people getting on a train and bring them back, can be up to 5 or 6 guns depending on how much risk they want to take."
- * Guns are stolen. R21: "Sometimes people rob freight cars to get guns to sell." R62: "People break into trains to get crates of guns." R10: "The people from the neighborhood go buy the guns from the people who've stolen them." R68: "A few years ago some guns in the neighborhood were from a robbed Indiana gun store." Several respondents mentioned the possibility of stealing guns from houses in the neighborhood.
- * Guns are from the "government" or corrupt police. R52. "Police take guns and put them back on the street." R69: "Crooked officers put guns back on the streets." Two respondents mentioned a systematic plan by the government to distribute guns.

A number of respondents drew some connection to the drug trade, sometimes blaming "crackheads" for selling guns, or mentioning a connection with the "Mexicans" (presumably a reference to the Mexican gang that has been a principal wholesale supplier of drugs to and through Chicago (McGahan, 2013)).

Several respondents mentioned arrangements in which outside traffickers were the source. In one case (R75), the son of a gunstore owner was "bringing crazy guns to the Southside," apparently in exchange for drugs. Another (R88) also reported the source as the son of a gunstore owner, in the western suburbs, who was selling to local gangs. It is possible that the reference was to the same individual. In a third case, a "white man" was bringing in many guns from the South.

R78 summed up the situation this way: "A lot of guys in the 'hood' don't have access — a lot of networking stuff going on."

The importance of trustworthy connections

In addition to providing their impressions of where guns were coming from, most respondents provided general observations about gun availability in their neighborhoods. While most Rs indicated that guns were readily available to them personally, they offered more differentiated comments about who could easily obtain a gun. Of the 50 Rs who commented on this matter, 16 said that anyone with money could buy a gun, while 34 emphasized the importance of personal connections.

Those who thought that gun sellers were indiscriminate referenced drug addiction in several cases, like this one:

Interviewer: Do you think these sources sell to just anyone in the neighborhood?

R73: "Yeah. It's not about color. It's about green, money. Money is the root of all evil. A person could be on a certain type of drugs and sell a \$300.00, \$400.00 gun for \$100.00 because they need to go do whatever they want to do. So it's really just about money, doesn't

matter.... You can be eight years old or ten years old, got kids, "You got \$20.00? Here take this.""

The willingness to sell to youngsters was expressed by several others:

Interviewer: OK, will these sources sell to just anyone in the neighborhood?

R50: Yeah, if you got money, they'll sell it to you no matter what age, race group or whatever as long as the money — if you got money to, you know, buy the gun.

Much more commonly expressed was the view that guns were not available to just anyone — that having a connection was essential. The connection could either be direct or through a mutual friend. These excerpts are representative:

Interviewer: "Will the sources that sell guns in the neighborhood, will they sell to anyone in the neighborhood? ..."

R67: Whoever they trust.

Interviewer: So can anyone who's looking to buy a gun just come in to the neighborhood and find one and buy it?

R78: "No. Me personally if you're not from _____ and I don't know you I won't sell you no gun. You couldn't just walk up on me and be like, "You got a gun you wanna sell?" So no, you probably have to know somebody."

Interviewer: So would these sources sell to just anyone in the neighborhood?

R42: No. Not just anybody. You have to know the person to sell them. Just like with anything, drugs, guns, you have to know somebody.

R30: Well, yeah, pretty much it's easy if you have a friend that knows a friend that has the guns for sale. They usually give them like, "Hey, you know, can you pass the word around?" I'm trying to sell this for this much money or if they need money they're like, "Hey, I've got these for sale."

Interviewer: If someone were selling a gun in the neighborhood, would they sell it to anybody or do you have to be associated with some type of gang or clique like you said?

R28: Uh, you've got to be associated because gangs is gonna sell it and gonna supply it.

A number of Rs explained the importance of trust by mentioning the possibility that the buyer might be a police officer or an informant — a reasonable concern, given that the Chicago Police Department does engage in undercover gun buys⁸

R37: One way or another you have to know 'em. They're not too sure about, you — you know, your comfort about you not calling the police and telling on them to get them arrested. So some way or another you have to know 'em a little bit.

R46: Not everybody can buy a gun. 'Cause it's like, like if don't nobody know you, ... they gonna think you the police or something.

Interviewer: Could someone come in... who's not from your neighborhood ... and try to buy a gun?

⁸ See Footnote 6.

R55: Uh, probably sell it, but they would probably do a background check on it to make sure you're not the police.

"Trust may be established partly through profiling, not only by race but also age. R30 indicated that a younger buyer was easier to trust. "If you're an older person then ... they feel like ... they can't be trusted, that person, unless they know you, unless somebody else verifies you.""

In several cases, the response was more nuanced, suggesting that some sellers were more careful than others:

Interviewer: Do you think someone who's not from the neighborhood could come into the neighborhood to buy a gun?

R33: It depend.

Interviewer: Depends on what?

R33: Like, who you ask. Like – ... Some people don't trust outside – but money rules the world

R91: It's – some situations, you got to know somebody that knows somebody. And then some situations, you might just stumble across a person selling it.

Interestingly, one respondent (R21) said that it was not just sellers who had to trust buyers, and also the reverse. "If they don't know you from the neighborhood or if somebody doesn't know you and you don't have no kind of credibility, they're not gonna buy a gun off of you."

Guns accessed by Rs during the 6 months before the current arrest

Of the 99 respondents, 70 admitted having access to a gun during the six-month window; 29 denied having access, but only two of those "deniers" refused to discuss their personal involvement with guns more generally. A total of 40 Rs admitted to having access to more than one gun, with 8 mentioning 10 or more. Some information was collected about 65 of these "secondary" guns.

Some of the 29 "deniers" may be telling the truth. While all of the respondents had a weapon-related charge in their criminal record, not all of them had a *current* gun-related charge.

For one-quarter of both the primary and secondary guns, there was little or no descriptive information. Almost all of those for which there was any description were handguns: among the primary guns there was just one rifle and one shotgun, and similarly for the secondary guns. For the 50 primary handguns, 72% were pistols and 28% revolvers. The predominance of handguns accords with other sources of information, including data from crime guns recovered by police and submitted for tracing (Cook et al., 2015).

Of the primary guns, just five would be classified as assault weapons, including a TEC-9, TEC-11, and AK47. As has frequently been reported, assault weapons play only a small role in everyday crime (Koper, 2013). Several mentioned a strong preference for large-capacity magazines for their firearms, noting that a magazine holding 30–50 rounds would give them a tactical advantage in a firefight.

Still, it is interesting to note that the majority of respondents demonstrated little knowledge of firearms. Many of the comments by Rs demonstrated ignorance of the manner in which firearms function, the ammunition requirements and the capabilities of their weapon of choice. Rs never discussed safe handling or storage practices, nor did they mention efforts to improve their knowledge of the firearms they possessed.⁹

⁹ These observations are in part due to Mark Jones, Law Enforcement Advisor to the Crime Lab and retired Special Agent with the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco Firearms and Explosives. We thank him for reading transcripts of the interviews and providing his expert commentary.

Table 2

Source of guns.

Source: Cook County Jail Pilot Survey (2013).

Source	Primary gun		Secondary guns		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Prior relationship	31	44.3	35	53.8	66	48.9
Family	4		4		8	
Gang	4		9		13	
Other connections	23		22		45	
No prior relationship	15	21.4	6	9.2	21	15.6
Mutual acquaintance	9		5		14	
Black market or "street"	6		1		7	
Gun store	2	2.9	0	0	2	1.5
Unclear	19	27.1	24	36.9	43	31.9
Refuses to answer/NA	3	4.3	0	0	3	2.2
Total	70	100	65	100	135	100

Sources of guns and types of transactions

In discussing the underground gun market in their neighborhoods, most respondents emphasized the importance of connections – prior relationships that could create sufficient trust to reassure the seller that the transaction would not create an unacceptable legal risk. This theme is further illustrated, with some variation, by the respondents' reports of guns that they had personally possessed in the recent past.

In the CCJ survey, a majority of the primary guns (40 of the 48 for which we have detailed information on the source) were obtained from family, fellow gang members, or other social connections; the fraction is still higher for secondary guns (Table 2). The "social connections" include 9 guns that were acquired from a "friend of a friend" – that is, a third party, known and presumably trusted by both buyer and seller. Only 2 of the 70 primary guns (3%) and no secondary guns were reported as purchased directly from a gun store. (This result is in close accord with the percentage of guns found to be purchased from gun stores by Chicago-area adult gang members in an analysis of administrative data (Cook et al., 2015).)

In the remaining cases the prior relationship between R and his gun source is unclear, often because R did not say. In 6 cases (coded in Table 2 as "black market") R said he had gotten the gun from someone on the street, usually a drug user or dealer, with some indication that the R did not really know the seller: R21, for example, "bought all of [my guns] off the streets ... from different people." R speculates they were drug users who "came and brought me a firearm for some reason." R5 bought the gun "from somebody in the neighborhood... on the street" for "\$80 and 3 bags of weed." No bullets came with it, so R acquired bullets from the "people I hang with." R49 described the transaction with a drug dealer this way: "he came up the block, wasn't nobody out there, it was early and he showed me two brand new .40s."

While most transactions seem fairly casual, several of the Rs are in the business of selling guns. R14 reported that his connections acquired

Table 3

Gun acquisition method.

Source: Cook County Jail Pilot Survey (2013).

Method	Primary firearm		Secondary firearms		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Buy or trade	42	60.0	41	63.0	83	61.5
Borrow/hold	6	8.6	8	12.3	14	10.4
Gift	8	11.4	4	6.2	12	8.9
Share	3	4.3	7	10.8	10	7.4
Steal	2	2.9	0	0.0	2	1.5
Unclear	7	10.0	5	7.7	12	8.9
Refuse to answer	2	2.9	0	0.0	2	1.5
Total	70	100.0	65	100.0	135	100.0

guns from a gun store (without explaining how). R42 purchased from “a guy I knew” who was “selling guns, and he’d go to the private dealer shows and just walk in and buy the guns.” This individual used to be from the neighborhood; R acquired two guns in this transaction in one day for \$300 each. R18 purchased guns from one primary contact in the neighborhood – “somebody I knew” although there were “lots of people in the neighborhood like that.” R37 appears to have dealt with a gun broker: “My guy knew about [the guns for sale]. So I paid my guy to give it to them. ... my guy brought the gun back to me.” The transaction he described took two or three days and cost \$460. R22 bought his gun from a “White guy that a couple of my guys knew” who came up from “down south.”

Type of transaction

Sixty percent of the primary guns were acquired by purchase, usually for cash though in some cases as a trade or a mixed arrangement. For example, R51 acquired a gun from a man he met at a party; the price included both cash and a PlayStation. Other deals involved drugs and cash, or, in one case, an even swap on two guns. Table 3 indicates the other types of transactions. Only two Rs indicated that they had stolen their primary gun, a surprisingly rare event – but in line with the results of the federal inmate surveys reported above.

The importance of social networks in arranging gun transactions is enhanced by the fact that a substantial minority of transactions is not limited to an exchange of a gun for money or something else, but rather reflect or require an ongoing relationship. Included in this category are transactions that are reported as gifts, or that are characterized as “sharing” or “borrowing.” The “gift” relationship includes several reports where family or gang associates provided the respondent with a gun after his release from jail or prison. R34, a gang member, indicated that “the older guys” would pass out guns when the situation on the street got tense.

In two cases, R reported holding a gun for a friend for a few hours while the friend attended to business for which he did not want to be armed. But R13 reported holding a friend’s gun for more than a month after the friend’s father found the gun and threatened to confiscate it. It also appears that gun sharing is standard practice in some gangs. R25 estimated that there were four guns in the neighborhood for 15 guys in the gang. Others mentioned that while they did not own a gun themselves, they hung out with guys who had guns and would share as needed. One mentioned that he shared with family members.

Sources of new guns

A recent study of guns confiscated from gang members in Chicago found, using administrative data, that about 3% of the adults had obtained their guns from an FFL in a formal transaction (Cook et al., 2015). Of the 70 primary guns in the CCJ survey, two respondents (just 3%) reported that they had an FOID card (the legal requirement for buying or possessing a gun in Illinois) and that they had purchased their guns from a store. The coincidence of identical rates helps confirm the survey results.

One important question in guiding regulatory enforcement is whether FFLs are playing a larger role in arming dangerous people than is suggested by this small percentage. In fact, a total of 10 primary guns (15%) were “new in the box” when acquired by the R, suggesting a tight connection to the first sale at the gun store. While the details are not always clear, here is the best account we can provide, gun by gun:

- purchased directly and legally from store by R (R27 and R59)
- purchased from a friend who obtained it from a clerk at a gun store (who had probably stolen it) (R60)
- purchased from a woman that was vouched for by a friend (R31)
- gift from a girlfriend who probably had an FOID (R36)
- purchase from a White man from the South, presumably a trafficker who had acquired the gun from a dealer in another state (R22)

- R was approached by a “drug dealer” – a stranger – who had two new guns that he was willing to sell for a good price (R49 and R79)
- little information provided about the nature of the transaction, though it appears to have been arranged through the Rs’ social networks (R11, R48, and R63).

Six additional new guns were mentioned by Rs and included in the tabulation of secondary guns.

Based on these reports, the only evidence suggesting complicity on the part of an FFL is the case in which a clerk probably stole a gun and sold it under the counter.

Gun selling

Of the 70 respondents who admitted having a gun during the six months prior to incarceration, 13 mentioned that they had sold guns during that period. Five of those said that they were buying and selling guns on a regular basis, although the scale of operation appears to be small and limited for the most part to the Rs’ social networks.

- R21 said he had sold all seven guns he had during that time, because “the most I have at one time is like one or two max.” He said that he receives calls from friends every couple of months “with a gun and a price.” If R liked both, he would purchase the new one and then sell another.
- R24 had six guns “but always ends up selling them” because they are no longer needed. He mentioned that he would sell at the same price as he bought if he knew and liked the buyer.
- R19 described being approached by acquaintances who wanted to sell him a gun. He would “call a few people” and if he found that he could make a profit, he’d go ahead and buy it.
- R67 mentioned that he and his closest associates bought and sold guns. He would “run into people” with guns for sale, and he would in turn sell in his social network: “...it can be a friend of a friend so they’re all friends.”
- R32 sold guns to people he knew, with the price depending on the condition from \$100–\$3000.

R92 said that he had sold a lot of guns in 2008 as a way to make some money, but apparently had gotten out of that business.

Others reported what appeared to be one-time events where they sold extra guns. For example, R17 reported that he had robbed a cell-phone store and recovered several guns which he sold. He reports “not needing a lot of guns.” R22 sold the first gun he owned, which had been in his possession for two years (since age 18), for \$200. R31 was persuaded by a “homie” (fellow gang member) to trade his TEC-11 (a machine pistol) for a car – he did not want to part with the pistol, but needed the car.

High turnover rate/short time to crime

Guns possessed by Chicago criminal offenders are typically quite old. The average age of guns confiscated from gang members by Chicago Police was over 11 years (Cook et al., 2015). But as suggested by Fig. 1, that does not mean that individual offenders hang on to their guns for long periods. Only one respondent mentioned having the same gun for over 5 years. Typically, respondents indicated that they had their “primary” guns for less than one year (21 of the 31 guns for which we obtained clear information); for the secondary guns, 26 of 30 had been in possession for less than a year. Respondents report a variety of ways in which a spell of possession for a particular gun may end: sold or traded, handed over to someone else to hold, lost, or (quite commonly) confiscated by the police.

One reason that offenders voluntarily give up a gun is that they fear it has become a legal liability. There were quite a few comments on

“dirty” guns — those that had been fired in a crime, and might provide evidence in a police investigation. R10 sold a gun because it “got dirty” to a buyer who needed a gun for self-protection and did not care about the gun’s history. R11 made the interesting comment that “If you’re a friend who borrows my gun and returns it dirty, I’ll be like ‘don’t worry about it...I’m gonna demolish it or sell it.’” He went on to say that he would sell dirty guns “to Indiana or West side so that it won’t even come back to the South side.” R85 also underlined the practice of selling dirty guns in other neighborhoods, indicating that if someone came into a neighborhood to sell a gun, then it was “probably a dirty gun they’re trying to get rid of.”

Respondents characterize the desire to part with a dirty gun as resulting from their concern that it would make them a suspect in an old crime.¹⁰ R46 indicated that he had parted with several shared guns because “nine times out of ten, man, if you get caught with some of the guns we got you gonna be gone for a long time...they dirty, the guns we got ain’t clean.” R32 reported on his desire for newer guns by indicating if he carried a “dirty” gun, “now you can get charged for a murder that you don’t know nothing about.”

For those selling “dirty” guns, this information might not be passed on to the seller unless it is a close relationship. R65 acknowledged that “you just take a chance...unless you know the person who lets you know.” Other respondents expected that firearms sold on the street would likely have been used in crime. R13 translated gang members selling guns as “when they say they have too many [guns]...that’s been used before, they don’t want [it].” When R47 was asked if he acquired his brand new gun from someone in the neighborhood, he replied, “Hell no. If I would I could have got it easier. I could have gotten them cheaper ...I know the gun clean. ...not gonna buy a dirty gun from somebody.” Instead, R47 sought an individual with a firearms license to ensure no prior use.

Discussion and conclusions

Most Americans, if interested in acquiring a gun, buy it from a gun store. The transaction requires some paperwork for the buyer. A clerk conducts a background check (which usually can be done quickly by telephone or computer) and keeps a record of the sale on file if the sale is made. This sort of formal on-the-books transaction poses little risk to the buyer if he or she is qualified to possess a gun. If the business is reputable, then the product quality will be guaranteed, and even if it turns out that the gun was used in a crime (in the case of a used gun), and becomes evidence in an investigation, the buyer will have paperwork documenting just when he became the owner. For a transaction of this sort, there is no particular advantage for the buyer and seller having a relationship outside of the immediate transaction — both buyer and seller are protected by the above-board nature of the transaction.

The situation is quite different for transactions in the underground market. Underage youths and convicts are not in a position to buy from a gun store or any law-abiding licensed dealer. While there may be guns available through private transactions, there are risks, both legal and physical. The result is that a private transaction may be difficult to arrange; the buyer and seller must find each other, and there may need to be assurances on both sides. Especially in a jurisdiction like Chicago, where guns are highly regulated and the police place a high priority on taking guns off the street, survey evidence suggests that it is common for criminals who would like to have a gun to indicate that they would have difficulty in obtaining one (Cook et al., 2007).

In this paper we explored how dangerous offenders do obtain their guns, reporting the results of both federal surveys of nationally representative samples of prison inmates, and also the results of a new survey of Cook County Jail. The CCJ survey results are generally in

line with the earlier federal surveys for items where they can be directly compared: it is rare for offenders to buy from licensed dealers, and also rare for them to steal their guns. Rather, the predominant sources of guns to offenders are family, acquaintances, fellow gang members — which is to say, members of their social network (Papachristos and Wildeman, 2013). The CCJ survey makes it clear that where offenders’ immediate connections are not able to provide them with a gun, they often turn to sources by which they are linked through a mutual acquaintance. A strong motivator for this degree of caution in Chicago is a concern, especially on the part of the sellers, that the other party to the transaction will report it to the police — or that they *are* the police, working undercover.

Another finding from the CCJ survey (and not investigated in the federal surveys) is that guns tend to turn over rapidly in the underground market. Many of the respondents have been in possession of several guns during the six months prior to the current incarceration, under a variety of circumstances and types of transactions. The frequency of transactions and high turnover suggests that an effective disruption of transactions might have an immediate effect on gun use in crime, and that the impact of such efforts would grow over the course of a year. Thus a supply-side approach to disarming offenders does not necessarily require great patience.

The “players” in the local underground gun market include some who do enough selling to be identified as “point sources” of guns (Cook and Braga, 2001). None of our respondents operated on a large scale, but there were reports of transacting on both sides of the market, playing the roles of retailer or broker. It is also clear that the gangs played some role, sometimes buying “crates” of guns from outside the city and distributing them to members. Several respondents reported dealing with traffickers who were bringing guns into Chicago. But for the most part even these transactions involved prior connections.

Many of our CCJ Survey respondents were convinced that the police placed a high priority on guns and posed enough of a threat to warrant caution in dealing with buyers or sellers whom they did not know or have reason to trust. There was also a remarkably widespread concern that police investigations would identify any guns that had been fired in a crime and use that evidence to arrest them if they happened to be in possession of the gun. In other words, the police are a powerful influence on the nature of Chicago’s underground gun market. Fear of arrest limits what transactions take place, making the market much less efficient than it would be otherwise (Cook et al., 2007). It appears, then, that continued and even expanded law enforcement efforts could increase transactions costs in this underground market.

The CCJ survey suggests that with adequate assurances of anonymity, asking offenders about their guns can yield valid qualitative information, despite the fact that the gun transactions they are reporting are almost always illegal. Over two-thirds of respondents were willing to talk about guns they had possessed shortly before the current incarceration, and almost all of the respondents were willing to answer general questions about the gun market in their neighborhoods. Resulting statistical patterns can be checked against other sources for several of the items, such as the likelihood of buying a gun from a gun store, and found to be valid. In general the respondents appeared well informed about gun transactions among residents of their neighborhood, but fewer were able or willing to speak knowledgeably about how guns got into the neighborhood in the first place. For the most part that may reflect genuine ignorance on their part concerning the gun-importing activities of traffickers, brokers, and gangs, who would presumably be reticent about revealing the specifics of their activities to their customers.

A systematic inquiry into the activities of underground professionals — brokers and traffickers — will require a different type of research that identifies some of those actors and persuades them to talk in depth about their activities. This sort of ethnographic inquiry is currently underway and appears very promising.

¹⁰ CPD since 2014 has conducted their own ballistics imaging matches to determine whether a recovered crime gun was used in past crimes (see Footnote 6), and which prosecutors have employed as evidence (Lansu, 2015; Williams-Harris, 2014).

Finally, we note that although our inquiry is focused on sources of guns to dangerous offenders, we acknowledge that such people account for only a fraction of the overall volume of gun assaults. For example, only about 40 percent of murder defendants in Cook County have been convicted of a felony (Cook et al., 2005).

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.04.021>.

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