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Gun crime: the market in and use of illegal firearms

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Crimes involving the use of firearms comprise around 0.4 per cent of all recorded offences in England and Wales and have doubled since the mid- to late-1990s (Povey and Kaiza, 2006). However, relatively little is known about criminal attitudes towards and the market in illegal firearms and the relationship, if any, between gun crime, illegal drug selling, gangs and a supposed 'gun culture'. This limits the development of policy, policing practice and an understanding of the impact of firearms legislation. Therefore, this research addresses these gaps by presenting evidence from interviews with 80 imprisoned male Firearms Act offenders aged 18 to 30. It also identifies potential interventions and deterrence strategies.

Key points

The market in illegal firearms and ammunition

- The source of firearms described by offenders included illegal importation, 'leakage' from legitimate sources (e.g. burgled shotguns) and the conversion of widely-available imitation firearms. Ammunition is relatively scarce and may be improvised or illegally manufactured. Some offenders were concerned about the risk of obtaining a gun used in a previous offence.
- Criminal contacts were pre-eminent in determining firearm availability. Specialist criminal 'armourers' were mentioned by at least 12 of the interviewees. Illegal firearms were circulated, particularly within gangs and other collectives.
- Prices varied by firearm type, quality and provenance. They ranged from £20 for an imitation firearm, £50 for a shotgun, £1,000+ for a 'new' purpose-built lethal handgun and £800–£4,000 for an automatic firearm.

The possession and use of illegal firearms

- Illegal drug markets underpin the criminal economy and represent the most important theme in relation to the illegal use of firearms. Firearms possession was reported in relation to robberies of drug dealers, territorial disputes, personal protection and sanctioning of drug market participants.
- In addition to drug dealer robbers, four other groups of armed robber were identified: specialist armed robbers, mixed offending robbers, opportunists and debtors. Armed robberies were committed with realistic imitation firearms by those who lacked contacts to obtain real firearms.
- Conflict formed part of the social relations of many offenders, notably including disputes related to status and respect. Even trivial disputes may result in shootings as guns elevate threat levels and a 'shoot or be shot' scenario precipitates pre-emptive violence. Gang or crew structures serve to escalate and perpetuate violence. Rivals may encounter each other in shared social spaces such as nightclubs where status may be publicly challenged.
- The illegal use of firearms is a complex problem. There are some clear recommendations, such as greater efforts to tackle the availability and conversion of highly realistic imitation firearms. However, most problems are more challenging and require social and economic rather than technical solutions.

Offenders interviewed

The 80 offenders included 36 who described themselves as White, 28 Black, 11 mixed race, four Asian and one Chinese; their average age was 24 years. Of the 80 offenders, 59 reported a disrupted family life, including 35 who had grown up in a single-parent household; 43 had been excluded from school, 22 permanently (only 15 reported any post-16 education); ten offenders had never worked; 49 only in unskilled or manual occupations.

Gang or crew membership

Around half of the interviewees indicated they had been in a gang or crew; most knew of other such groups. Although reported gang or crew cultures and structures varied considerably, four 'ideal type' collective structures were identified (Box 1).

Box 1 Four types of gang or crew

- **Close friendship groups:** a social focus, offering safety in numbers and physical backup.
- **Associates:** known to each other but not close friends, typically interacting socially, sharing spaces such as housing estates, and engaged in low-level criminality; an important interface with local criminal cultures.
- **Criminal crews:** focussed on activities like controlling local drugs markets and, for some, conducting armed robberies and other offending.
- **Organised crime networks:** almost always engaged in drug market participation, e.g. middle-market level activities, in addition to offending such as more serious armed robberies and quasi-legitimate enterprises such as door security.

Offending

Half the offenders had been convicted of robbery as their primary current offence, 25 of firearm possession, eight of violence, two each of burglary, drugs and false imprisonment and one of theft. Fifty-eight had previous convictions, at least six for firearms offences.

Victimisation

For most interviewees the distinction between offender and victim was significantly blurred (see Table 1). However, typically the police only knew about victims in the case of fatalities or serious injury. Interviewees reported a preference for personal retribution and a fear of being labelled a 'grass' (police informant).

First contact with firearms

Almost half of the offenders first experienced firearms in the context of crime, notably associating with criminal friends.

Table 1 Different experiences of violence reported by interviewees (n=80)

Type of violence experienced	No.
Had previously been threatened with guns	40
Shot at	29
Had been shot	8
Had been stabbed	28
Injured with other weapons	17
Had been robbed	34
Had been kidnapped	3
Reported friends/family shot and injured	26
Reported friends/family shot dead	26

Another quarter first experienced airguns and airsoft/BB guns, typically in their early teens (BB guns usually refer to low-powered imitation firearms that discharge plastic pellets). Six had first used guns in legitimate contexts and a further six had encountered them during violence in their countries of origin.

The market in illegal firearms and ammunition

Interviewees provided a range of insights into the market in illegal firearms and ammunition. Nevertheless, questions remain that would require further research, e.g. concerning international sources of illegal firearms. Table 2 shows the types of firearms used for 76 offenders.

Table 2 Different types of firearms used including the different types of 'real' firearms

Type of firearm used	No.
'Real' firearms	71
Handguns	41
Shotguns	20
Automatic weapons	6
Stun guns	3
CS gas canister	1
Imitations	13
BB guns	6
Converted imitation firearms	4
Blank firers	4
Air guns	2
Deactivated firearms	1
Reactivated firearms	1
Unspecified type	4
Total no. firearms used	106

Notes: A total of 106 firearms were involved in the offences of 76 offenders (4 claimed no firearm was present).

Firearm supply, procurement and disposal

Firearms came to be possessed and/or used illegally through various methods. These include firearms illegally imported into the UK, misappropriated legally-owned firearms (e.g. burgled shotguns) and legally purchased imitation and deactivated firearms and airguns illegally converted to fire live ammunition.

Firearm availability is pre-eminently determined by criminal contacts under predominantly closed market conditions. At least 12 offenders described individuals who specialised in supplying firearms ('armourers'), including several who specialised in converting imitation firearms.

Choice was generally limited, although a well-connected minority reported having access to a range of firearms.

Reported prices varied, sometimes markedly, but there was some consistency. Price was determined by a combination of: firearm type and availability; 'leakage' from legal sources; location; firearm quality; firearm provenance; criminal contacts; how quickly the gun is required; whether the seller is a dependent drug user; and ammunition availability. See Box 2 for details of firearm types and cost.

Only four offenders described always keeping their gun

with them; generally guns were kept at home, buried or otherwise accessible – typically being minded by third parties. In many cases used guns are sold on, keeping them in circulation and obscuring their provenance, something that was consistently mentioned as a cause for concern.

'... you have to be very careful, cos you can buy a gun that killed people... you can get life for that, for things that you haven't even done.'
(London)

The possession and use of illegal firearms

Development of a criminal career

The broader socio-economic context described by the offenders can be summarised as follows. Social pressures to attain a conspicuously material lifestyle in the context of economic hardship are reconciled by some through involvement in the criminal economy, in many cases facilitated by the availability of criminal opportunities. This is reinforced by the presence of criminal role models and other visibly 'successful' criminals demonstrating the viability of criminal careers that in some cases are more lucrative, at least in the short-term, than the likely legitimate alternatives.

Box 2 Choice of firearms and costs

Shotguns

Shotguns, particularly 'sawn-off', tend to be chosen for their availability and significant intimidatory value and are the weapon of choice for more serious armed robbers. Prices appear to be very low, around £50 to £200 (although some at £700 to £800 were mentioned). The low price appears to result from ongoing leakage from legitimate sources and ammunition is relatively easy to obtain.

Converted imitation firearms

Converted firearms are more widely available and cheaper than purpose-built firearms, although they are considered inferior and indeed dangerous to use. New prices were reported to range from £400 to £800, with .38" revolvers at the lower end.

Automatic weapons

Five offenders had been caught with automatic weapons, in all cases related to violent conflict. The symbolic value, overwhelming power and often indiscriminate aim of these guns seems to conform to a 'gangster' stereotype not aspired to by the majority. Costs ranged from £800 to £4,000.

Imitation firearms

Imitation firearms were reported to be readily available and often very realistic. Costs ranged from £20 to £110 from legitimate outlets.

Purpose-built lethal handguns

Handguns are more concealable than shotguns, making them ideal for individuals who possess firearms for their own protection.

'Yeah, it's easier to conceal innit. The last thing you want is a fucking shotgun if you're going out or something.' (London)

The reported prices varied considerably, from around £150 to £200 for a gun known to have been used in a crime, to a typical £1,000 to £1,400 for a new 9mm model. They are generally sold with one full load of ammunition included.

Ammunition procurement

Ammunition is generally bought in small quantities with a gun and priced as a package. Ammunition is relatively scarce and harder to obtain than firearms, with the exception of shotgun cartridges. In some cases, criminals are exploiting a legal loophole to manufacture ammunition themselves, or else are using improvised ammunition such as blank firing ammunition combined with a ball bearing. Prices varied widely, from £2,000 to £3,000 for a box of .45" ammunition to £0.50 a bullet for a .38".

Ancillary items

Three offenders were convicted of offences relating to stun guns, with one also being convicted of possessing CS gas. There were ten references to bulletproof vests, four to sound moderators ('silencers') and one to night vision goggles.

'It's the whole rat race thing, you know. We're living in that age now, where if you ain't, like, wearing Nike Shox for example, then you know, you're a tramp... a lot of people can't afford it, but they see it, and if they ain't got em, they ain't part of it...' (West Midlands)

'Like, in the poor areas, yeah they look up to them [drug dealers]. They see them with like nice cars, superbikes, like um, chains, jewellery, lots of money, they see that and they want to be just like them. And that's really educating the kids really, it ain't the schools, it's really them.' (London)

Illegal drug markets

Illegal drug markets were found to underpin the criminal economy and represent the single most important theme in relation to the illegal use of firearms, characterised by systemic violence that appears to increase towards the street (retail) end of the market. Firearms possession was reported in relation to robberies of drug dealers, territorial disputes, personal protection and sanctioning of drug market participants.

'...when you are making that much money, a lot of people try to rob you... And because people were hearing about the money that I was making, that is why I bought the gun and started carrying it... solely for protection.' (London)

Robbery and burglary

In addition to drug dealer robberies, four types of armed robber were identified:

- specialists, most demonstrating a degree of target preference
- mixed offending robbers who committed robberies alongside other offences
- opportunists, including individuals who had obtained imitation firearms that facilitated serious offending and individuals associating with criminals who involved them in unplanned robberies
- debtors, who used armed robbery to try and pay off debts, typically owed to other criminals, sometimes under duress.

The ready availability of realistic imitation firearms enables robberies to be committed by individuals who lack the criminal contacts necessary to obtain real firearms.

Violence including gangs or crews

Conflict forms a significant part of the social relations of many offenders, especially disputes related to status and respect – so-called 'beef'. Even quite trivial disputes may result in shootings as the presence of firearms elevates

threat levels and the so-called 'shoot or be shot' scenario precipitates pre-emptive violence.

'...you just have to bust [shoot] in their face before they bust at you.' (West Midlands)

Gang or crew structures escalate and perpetuate violence, which may transcend individual incidents and become generalised.

Nightclubs and other public social venues are significant here. Violence can escalate in shared social spaces where rivals meet. An individual's status may be publicly challenged which necessitates retaliation. Where such individuals are engaged in armed criminality, trivial disputes may quickly escalate into fatal violence. Access to firearms and a public audience both raise the stakes.

'Because you're raving, you're round other gangs; you are round other people like you aren't you? There are people like you and you could step on someone's shoe and they'd want to fight you... If you go raving and you want to feel safe, you want to feel alright, you've got to have a gun on you.' (London)

Meanwhile, those involved in the door security industry may be drawn into these conflicts, or even targeted by rival firms seeking access to potentially lucrative security contracts.

Possession offences

Of the 25 offenders caught in possession of firearms, eight were minding them for other criminals. The main 'other reasons' stated included protection – typically in the context of drug markets or violence – and offences in which a firearm was retrieved about which the offender denied any prior knowledge. The highly constrained legislation concerning firearms possession raises several issues. For example, accused persons facing the mandatory minimum sentence appear to have no incentive to enter an early guilty plea or co-operate with wider investigations. Also, individuals may be set up (e.g. by rivals).

Gun culture?

Two types of criminal gun culture were identified:

- an instrumental criminal gun culture in which guns are used only for offensive criminal purposes such as armed robbery
- a complex criminal gun culture in which the role of firearms is more generalised, including offensive, defensive and symbolic functionality.

The latter type of gun culture is more recent and appears to reflect changing criminal cultures. It is becoming increasingly significant. It is underpinned by three consistent themes, often hand-in-hand:

- the ascendancy of criminal role models
- the market in illegal drugs
- cultures of gang or crew membership.

Increasingly, firearms have become a normal part of the systemic violence found in the street-level criminal economy. They have assumed a symbolic significance as they have become associated with criminal affluence resulting from activities such as drug dealing and robbery, and have been conflated with respect, status and violent potential. The extent to which this symbolism may be attributed to popular cultural sources such as the urban music industry and media more generally is unclear, but on balance appears peripheral.

Preventing gun crime

A number of intervention and deterrence strategies are discussed below.

Tackling the market in illegal firearms

- Ongoing efforts are required to tackle the manufacture and sale of convertible imitation firearms and the conversion process. It may be possible to exploit criminals' concerns about the dangers of using converted imitation firearms to limit their sale and use.
- Consideration should be given to further controls on realistic imitation firearms.
- The legal loophole allowing criminals to lawfully obtain ammunition components and tools should be closed and further controls on blank ammunition considered. Also, the loophole allowing shotgun ammunition to be transferred to and possessed by non-certificated individuals should be closed.
- It may be possible to exploit criminals' concerns about buying firearms that have previously been used in crime.
- Enabling discretion in relation to mandatory sentencing may offer some benefits. For example, it may provide an incentive for individuals caught minding guns for other criminals to co-operate with police investigations into the origins of those guns.
- Further amnesties should be considered to try and reduce the existing stock of illegal or unwanted firearms.
- Publicity could be used to make offenders and others aware of the likely consequences of getting involved with illegal firearms, particularly in relation to conflict escalation.

Criminal justice system

- The five-year mandatory minimum sentence for possession of a firearm was well known (but those interviewed were serving prison sentences). Longer sentences might bring about counter-productive outcomes, such as offenders trying to 'shoot their way out' if challenged by the police.
- Greater availability of witness protection resources could be beneficial, as could greater use of independent intermediaries such as Crimestoppers.
- Expanding the use of Independent Advisory Groups should help police to understand the communities they are policing better.
- There may be scope for increasing the use of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) to disrupt gangs, criminal networks and drug dealing.

Diversion from crime

- Further research could explain the economics of drug dealing and empirical evidence could produce a means or lever with which to deter young people from entering drug dealing.
- Publicity, targeted at young people, should highlight successful convictions and criminal asset confiscation to undermine criminal role models.
- There may be greater scope for promoting the advantages of legitimate employment to young people and educating them about their options, particularly outside their immediate area.
- Greater provision of youth services should be supported, particularly in deprived inner-city communities.
- Gang or crew disruption and mediation programmes may be beneficial in some areas.

Harm reduction in the criminal economy

- A public health/harm reduction approach would seek to minimise levels of violence within the criminal economy.

Conclusions

The illegal use of firearms is not a singular problem but is complex, entrenched and poses significant challenges to communities, police and policy makers. Some findings point to clear recommendations, such as greater efforts to tackle the availability and conversion of highly realistic imitation firearms. Most, however, are more challenging and require social and economic rather than technical solutions.

The emergence of a complex gun culture in which firearms have become embedded within broader criminal lifestyles suggests significant limitations to interventions which are based on a rational choice understanding of offending. It highlights the need to address the social and cultural significance of offending behaviour such as gang conflict, armed robbery and drug dealing. Furthermore, the relationship between illegal firearms and crime is constantly changing. Consequently, ongoing efforts are

required to keep abreast of changes to ensure that they are responded to appropriately.

A number of areas for further research are proposed, including further research on the origins of purpose-built lethal firearms in the criminal economy and the role of women in relation to the possession and use of illegal firearms.

Methodological note

This qualitative research study is based on in-depth interviews with 80 imprisoned and recently convicted male Firearms Act offenders aged 18 to 30, focussing on London, Greater Manchester, Nottinghamshire and the West Midlands. The sample is broadly in line with the national picture for gun crime in England and Wales (Povey, D. and Kaiza, P., 2006). Further details on the methodology can be found in Hales et al. (2006).

Reference

Povey, D. and Kaiza, P. (2006) 'Recorded crimes involving firearms'. Chapter 3 in K. Coleman, C. Hird and D. Povey (Eds.) *Violent Crime Overview, Homicide and Gun Crime 2004/2005*

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For a more detailed report see *Gun Crime: the market in and use of illegal firearms* by Gavin Hales, Chris Lewis and Daniel Silverstone (2006). Home Office Research Study No. 298. London: Home Office. Copies are available from the Home Office website <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/>