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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Bureau of Justice Statistics



Firearms and Crimes of Violence

Selected Findings from National Statistical Series

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U.S. Department of Justice
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Acting Director**

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Introduction

This report presents key findings from Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) surveys relating to crime and the role of firearms. Data from these national surveys describe the extent to which victims confront armed offenders, the consequences of such victimizations, and how offenders obtained and used their firearms. This report also summarizes information that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under its Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR), obtained from the more than 17,000 law enforcement agencies nationwide on the extent of firearm involvement in murders, rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults.

BJS is the statistical arm of the U.S. Department of Justice and is responsible for the collection, analysis, and reporting of information relating to criminal victimization and the administration of justice throughout the Nation. Each year since 1973, BJS has conducted interviews with a scientifically designed sample of more than 100,000 persons residing in approximately 40,000 American households. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is the means for the public to describe its exposure to crime and the consequences of crime. Victims are asked about the role of firearms in the crimes they experienced.

Since 1972, BJS has conducted nationally representative surveys of offenders in local jails and State prisons. Information is gathered from inmates about their criminal and social backgrounds, histories of drug and alcohol use, and participation in drug and alcohol treatment and other correctional programs. These interviews also provide comprehensive data on the use of weapons and descriptions of the victims of violent incarcerated offenders. Findings from the most recent survey of nearly 14,000 State prisoners were summarized in the BJS report, *Survey of State Prison Inmates, 1991*.

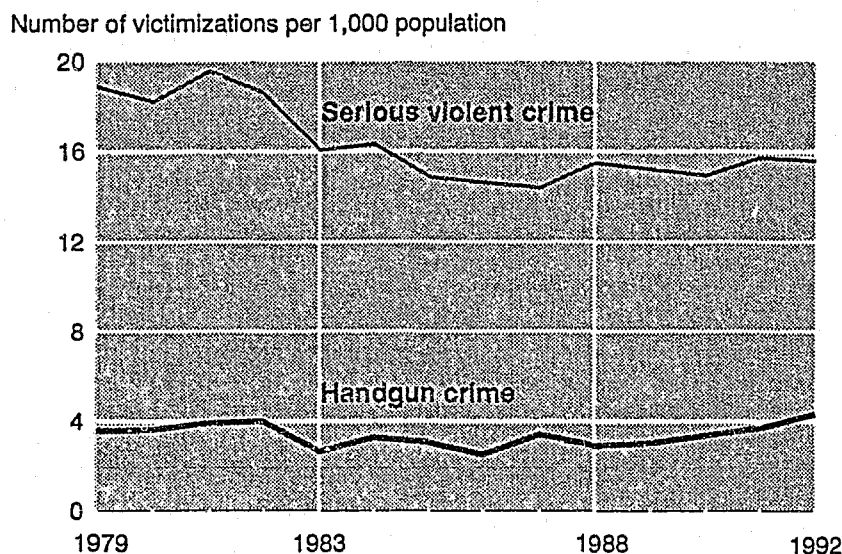
In the coming months, BJS will publish a major report on firearms and crime to provide substantially greater detail on the nature and background of crimes that involve firearms. The report will complement previous BJS reports to the Nation on crime and on drug-related crime.

Lawrence A. Greenfeld
Acting Director

How often are firearms involved in crime?

The handgun crime rate in 1992 reached the highest recorded level

Rates of serious violent crime and handgun crime victimization, 1979-92



Source: BJS, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1979-92

Note: Serious violent crimes (rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) include handgun crimes.

Each year Americans experience an average of 6.7 million violent crimes — rapes, robberies, and assaults. Victims of violent crime report that in almost 13% of the crimes, the offender was armed with a firearm — an average of about 858,000 armed attacks with firearms each year. In addition, in 1992 more than 16,000 persons were murdered with firearms. (NCVS, UCR)

Between 1987 and 1992, there were just over 40 million violent crimes reported by victims of rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. In the same years, there were an additional 134,180 murders and nonnegligent manslaughters. (NCVS, UCR)

From 1987 to 1992 victims faced armed offenders in 5.1 million violent incidents and in 85,453 of the murders and nonnegligent manslaughters. In just under 1 million of these

firearms incidents, the victim was either injured (880,000) or killed (85,000). Each year between 1987 and 1992 an average of 161,000 violent crimes with firearms resulted in injury or death. (NCVS, UCR)

Rape victims report that about 6% of their attackers used a handgun

Nationwide, rape victims reported a similar amount of weapon use — about 20% of rape victims said that their attacker used a weapon. About a third of these victims, or about 6% of all rape victims, report that the weapon was a handgun. (NCVS)

A recent study of forcible rapes reported to the police in three States found that about 5% of such crimes may involve the use of a firearm. (NIBRS)

Law enforcement agencies nationwide report that each year nearly 600,000 firearm crimes are brought to their attention

In 1992 about a third of all murders, robberies, and aggravated assaults reported to law enforcement agencies were committed with firearms —

more than 16,000 murders, 271,000 robberies, and 278,000 aggravated assaults. (UCR)

Since 1987 the number of violent attacks that involved firearms and that were reported to law enforcement agencies have increased rapidly — up 55% by 1992. The number has grown an average of about 40,000 per year. During the same years, the number of violent crimes without firearms increased 22%.

Violence involving firearms grew 2½ times faster than violent crime that involved no firearms. (UCR)

Between 1987 and 1992—
the number of crimes with firearms

increased 36% for murder
59% for robbery and
52% for aggravated assaults

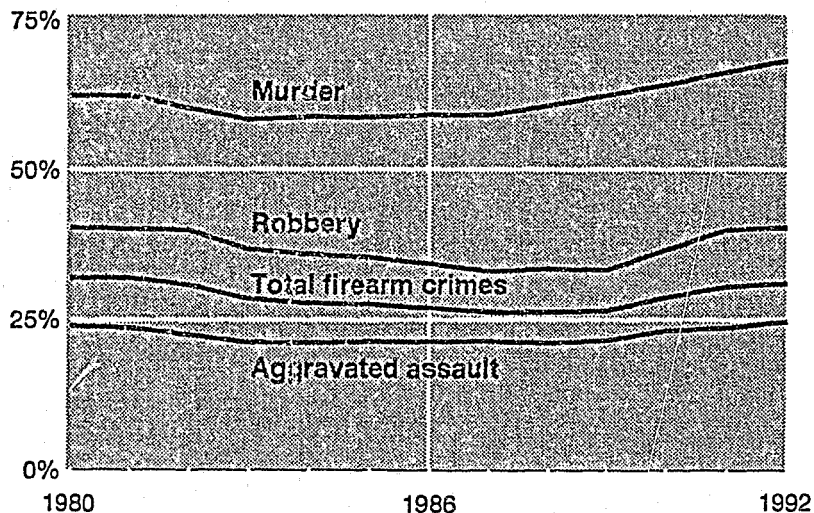
the number of crimes without firearms

decreased 8% for murder
increased 16% for robbery
increased 26% for aggravated assault.

The number of robberies with firearms grew at 4 times the rate of increase in the number without firearms; the number of aggravated assaults with firearms, at about twice the rate of increase in such assaults without firearms. (UCR)

Firearms were involved in a larger percentage of murders than in other violent crimes

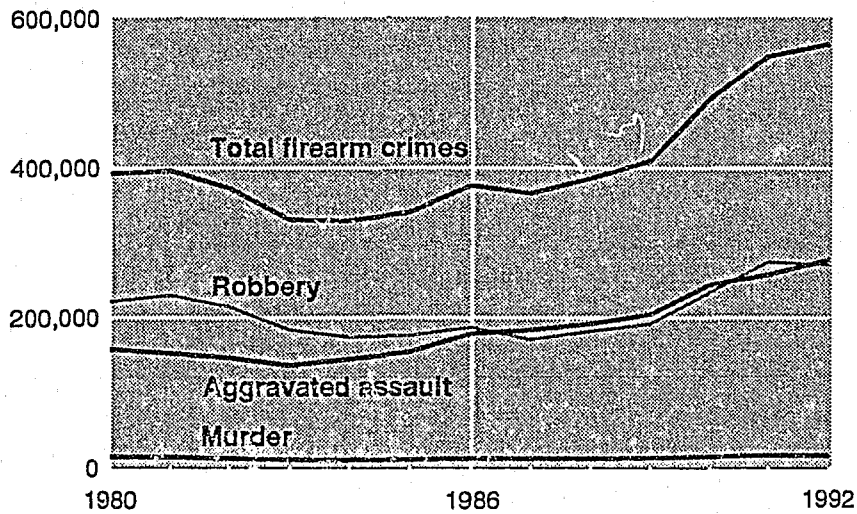
Percent of reported crime involving a firearm



Source: FBI, *Crime in the U.S.*, 1980-92.

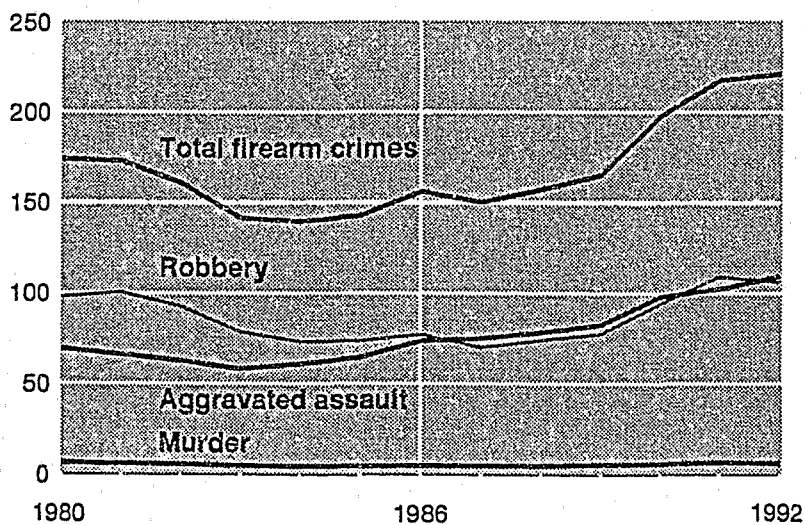
The number of violent firearm crimes reported to law enforcement authorities increased nearly a third from 1980 to 1992, but the number per 100,000 population grew more slowly

Number of violent firearm crimes reported to the police



Source: FBI, *Crime in the U.S.*, 1980-92.

Number of violent firearm crimes reported to the police per 100,000 population



Source: FBI, *Crime in the U.S.*, 1980-92.

Who are the victims of violent firearm crimes?

Rates of victimization involving a handgun were the highest among persons age 16 to 19

Persons age 16-19 had per capita rates of handgun victimization in 1992 which were 21% higher than those for persons age 20-24. The rates for those age 16-19 were more than 2 times the rate of those age 25-34, 3 times the rate of those age 35-49, nearly 8 times the rate of those age 50-64, and 15 times the rate of those age 65 or older.

(NCVS)

A disproportionate number of young black men die from gunshots

Among victims of homicides involving firearms, age 15 to 24, black males account for nearly 60% of the victims. They account for about 7% of all persons in that age group.

(UCR)

Criminals used handguns to murder 371 law enforcement officers in a 6-year period

Between 1987 and 1992, 415 law enforcement officers were killed in a felony; 91%, or 376 officers, were killed by a firearm. Of the firearms used to kill law enforcement officers (excluding the officer's own gun), 73% were handguns, 19% rifles, and 8% shotguns. During the same period, 20,381 law enforcement officers were assaulted by offenders with firearms and more than 1 in 4 of those assaulted were injured.

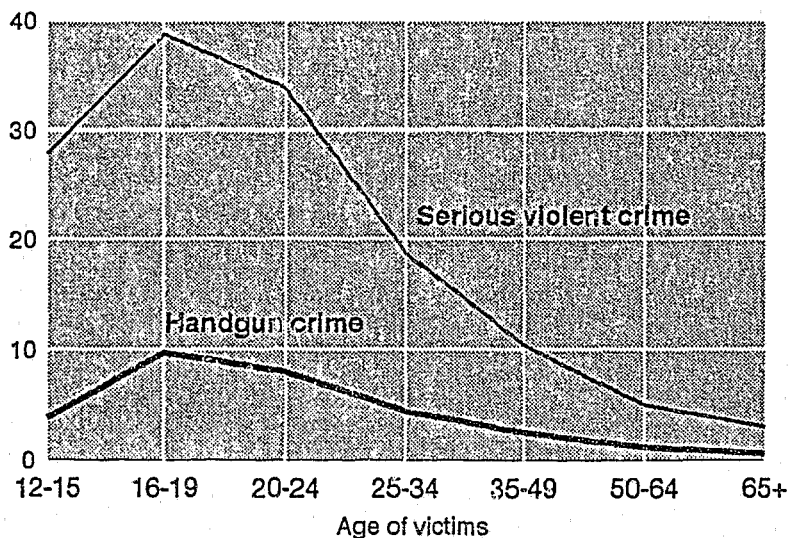
(UCR)

Among the offenders identified in the killing of law enforcement officers, 53% had a prior conviction history and 22% were on probation or parole at the time of the offense.

(UCR)

Handgun crime, like all serious violent crime, affects the young more than older persons

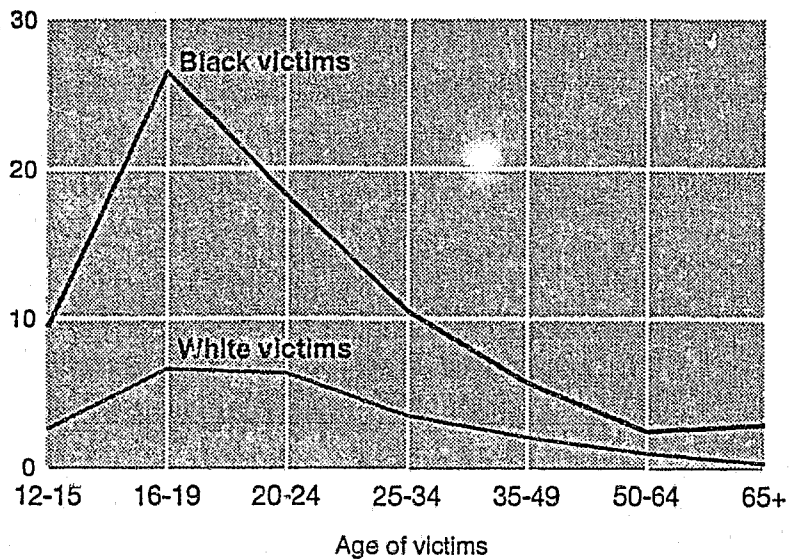
Number of victimizations per 1,000 population



Source: BJS, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1987-92

Blacks are more often victims of handgun crime than whites

Number of victimizations per 1,000 population

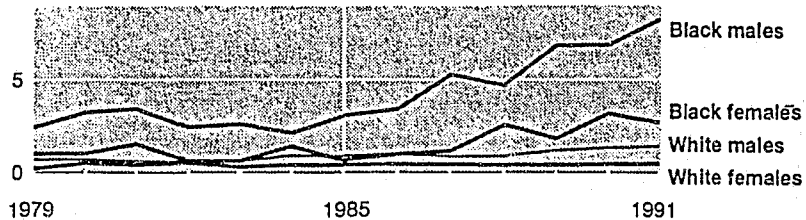


Source: BJS, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1987-92

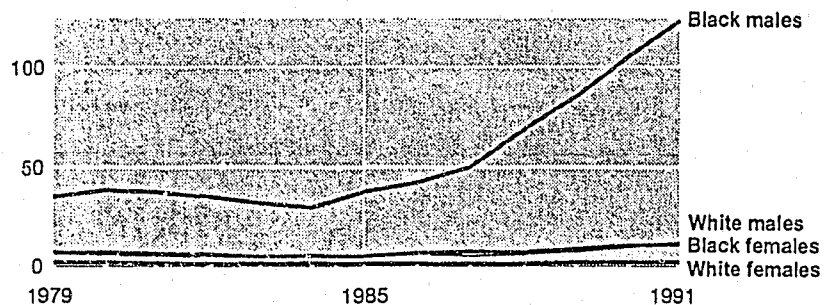
The rates of firearm homicides for young people generally increased from 1979 to 1991, especially for young black males

Number of homicides per 100,000 population

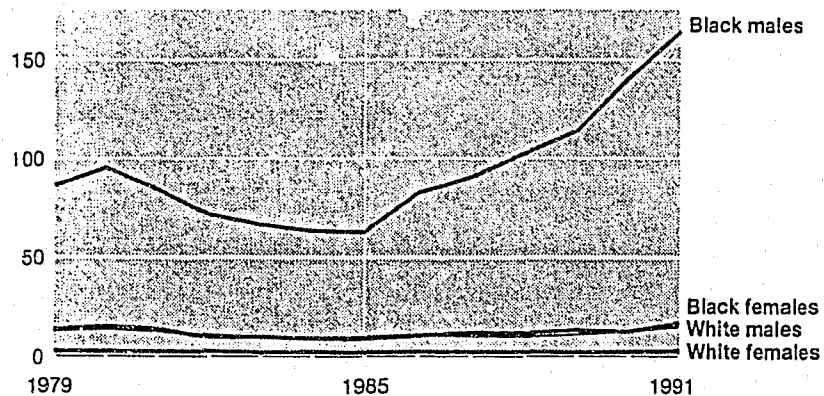
Ages 10-14



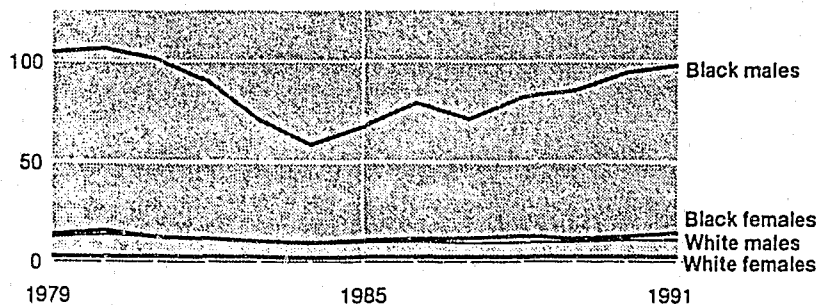
Ages 15-19



Ages 20-24



Ages 25-34



Source: Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics*, 1979-91

What are the characteristics and outcomes of handgun victimizations?

	<u>Percent of handgun crimes</u>	
Victim/offender relationship		
Stranger	77%	• The offender in most handgun crimes is a stranger to the victim.
Acquaintance	18	
Relative	5	
Number of offenders		
1	60%	• Most handgun crimes are committed by offenders acting alone.
2	22	
3 or 4	13	
5 or more	5	
Victim injuries		
None	85%	• 2% of victims who face offenders with handguns are shot.
Minor	10	
Gunshot	2	
Other serious	3	
Medical care received by gunshot victims		
Long hospital stay (8 or more days)	34%	• Of those victims who are injured, over a third require a hospital stay of 8 or more days.
Moderate hospital stay (3-7 days)	16	
Brief hospital stay (1-2 days)	17	
Emergency room only	29	
Care outside hospital	4	

Source: BJS, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1979-87

Between 1987 and 1992 in nearly 400,000 incidents of violence, the victim had a firearm for self-protection

In 36% of these incidents, the offender was also armed with a firearm. Victims were

seriously injured (gunshot wound, knife wound, internal injuries, broken bones, loss of teeth, loss of consciousness, or 2 or more days in a hospital) in about 7% of the incidents where they were armed. (NCVS)

Who uses firearms to commit crimes?

Almost 30% of violent inmates carried a gun during the crime for which they were sentenced to prison

Offense	Percent of State inmates who during the crime for which they were sentenced to prison	
	Carried a gun	Fired a gun
Total	16.3%	7.8%
Violent	28.9	15.9
Murder	43.6	37.6
Rape	5.2	.4
Robbery	34.4	5.5
Assault	31.1	24.9
Property	3.2	.7
Burglary	3.8	.9
Larceny	2.1	.3
Motor vehicle theft	3.3	.3
Drugs	4.2	.3
Possession	4.4	.2
Trafficking	4.0	.3
Public order*	10.1	2.7

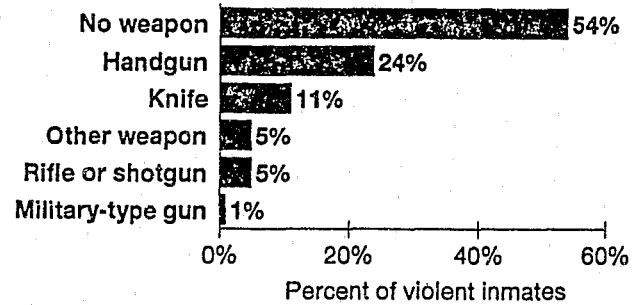
*Public-order offenses include weapons possession or trafficking, driving while intoxicated, gambling and commercial vice, offenses against nature and decency, and other such crimes.

An estimated 16% of State prison inmates reported that they carried a firearm when they committed the crime for which they were serving time. Half of those carrying a firearm discharged it during the course of the crime. About 4% of property and drug offenders said they carried a firearm while committing the offense for which they were serving time.

(SSPI)

About a fourth of inmates serving a sentence for a violent crime carried a handgun during the crime

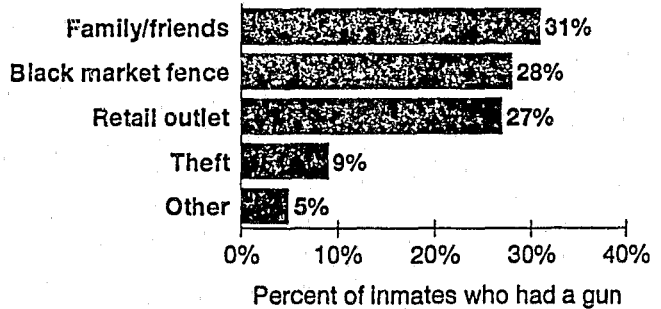
Type of weapon used by inmates



Source: BJS, *Survey of State Prison Inmates, 1991*

Over 1 in 4 inmates who had a handgun said that they bought it at a retail shop

Source of last gun obtained by inmate



Source: BJS, *Survey of State Prison Inmates, 1991*

Among offenders who had a prior adult criminal record and who possessed a handgun, 23% obtained the handgun from a retail outlet while among first-time offenders who possessed handguns 40% obtained the gun from a retail source.

More than a fourth of all inmates owned or possessed a firearm in the month before their last arrest

More than 40% of all inmates reported that they had owned or possessed a firearm during their lives — 34% had owned or possessed a handgun, 29% a rifle or shotgun, and 8% a military-type weapon. During the month before their arrest for the crime for which they were serving time, 24% said they had owned or possessed a firearm — 18% had a handgun, 12% a rifle or shotgun, and 3% a military-type weapon. (SSPI)

About 40% of respondents to a nationwide survey conducted as a part of the General Social Survey (GSS) by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) reported owning or possessing a firearm in their household. About 20% of GSS respondents claimed ownership of a handgun; speaking of the month before their arrest, 18% of inmates reported handgun possession. (SSPI, GSS)

A larger percentage of inmates with less severe criminal records had carried or used a firearm during the crime for which they were in prison

About a quarter of State prisoners reported that they had no adult history of sentences to probation or prison. The remainder, about three-fourths of all prisoners, had a prior adult criminal record of sentences to probation or prison. (SSPI)

were more likely than inmates with such a history to have carried a gun and to have used it during the offense. Given the absence of a criminal record, the gravity of the current offense, including the possession or use of a firearm during the crime, may have been a major factor leading to a prison sentence. (SSPI)

Offenders serving time in State prisons without a prior history of adult sentences

Offense	Percent of State inmates who during the crime for which they were sentenced to prison	
	Carried a gun	Fired a gun
First-timers	21.5%	12.8%
Violent	30.7	19.5
Property	4.4	1.0
Drugs	3.4	.4
Recidivists	14.4%	6.1%
Violent	27.9	13.9
Property	3.0	.7
Drugs	4.3	.3

Six percent of recidivist inmates in prison for murder had bought the murder handgun at a retail outlet

The 1991 Survey of State Prison Inmates interviewed a national sample of prisoners representing the more than 75,000 offenders serving time for murder or nonnegligent manslaughter. Among these offenders, just under 6% had a prior history of sentences as an adult to prison, jail, or probation and had purchased the handgun used in the offense at a retail store or gunshop. Translated into the 1993 prison population, this 6% represents an estimated 5,000 murderers in State prison.
(SSPI,NPS)

Background checks deterred inmates from purchasing handguns at a retail shop

More than half of the inmates who got their most recent handgun from an illegal source indicated that they had not bought the weapon at a retail shop because of concerns about a background check (50%), a waiting period (3%), or the necessity of completing Federal forms which could be used to trace the weapon (2%). About 1 in 6 of these inmates said that they felt they could purchase the firearm more cheaply from an illegal source.

About a fifth of prison inmates —

- who were first-time adult offenders and
- who had carried or fired a handgun during their offense and
- who had not acquired the gun at a retail gunshop

— said they had avoided a retail purchase of the firearm because of legal requirements (background check, waiting period, or Federal forms). By contrast, about half of recidivist offenders who had carried or fired a handgun

obtained at other than a retail gunshop said that they sought to obtain the weapon elsewhere because of those legal requirements.
(SSPI)

A quarter of those who obtained the handgun from family members or friends reported a concern about a background check; an additional quarter of these inmates reported that the cost for the firearm was cheaper than from a retail store.
(SSPI)

More than a third of the States perform criminal records checks or issue permits to buy firearms

In early January, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms reported that 18 States were either conducting background checks before firearms sales or granting a firearms purchase permit. Preliminary reports from 11 of these States reveal more than 21,000 denials of purchases in 1993 because of criminal records checks.

Theft and burglary are major sources of firearms for criminals

A firearm is stolen in more than 356,000 offenses every year. Firearms are stolen in an estimated 228,000 household burglaries, 113,000 personal or household thefts, more than 7,000 motor vehicle thefts, and more than 8,000 violent crimes.
(NCVS)

How many high school students possess guns?

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a 1991 sample survey of 12,272 high school students nationwide, revealed that 11% of students reported having carried a handgun at least once during the 30 days preceding the survey. (CDC)

A recent survey of 758 male students in 10 inner-city high schools found that 22% of the students possessed firearms. The most common sources for guns were borrowing them from family or friends (53%) or buying them on the street (37%) or from a family member or friend (35%). (NIJ/OJJDP)

Abbreviations of sources used

CDC: Centers for Disease Control,
National Center for Health Statistics,
Morbidity and Mortality Weekly
Oct. 16, 1992

GSS: General Social Survey

NCVS: The BJS National Crime Victim-
ization Survey

NIJ/OJJDP: National Institute of Justice/
Office of Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention "Gun
acquisition and possession in
selected juvenile samples,"
Research in Brief Dec. 1993

NPS: National Prisoner Survey

SSPI: The BJS *Survey of State Prison*
Inmates, 1991

UCR: The FBI Uniform Crime Reports,
Crime in the United States or
Law Enforcement Officers Killed
and Assaulted

Appendix

Table 1. Murders,* robberies, and aggravated assaults in which firearms were used, estimated numbers of offenses and per capita rates, 1980 to 1992

Year	Total estimated firearm crimes		Murders with firearms*		Robberies with firearms		Aggravated assaults with firearms	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
1980	392,083	174.0	14,377	6.4	221,170	98.1	156,535	69.5
1981	396,197	172.9	14,052	6.1	230,226	100.5	151,918	66.3
1982	372,477	160.9	12,648	5.5	214,219	92.5	145,609	62.9
1983	330,419	141.2	11,258	4.8	183,581	78.5	135,580	57.9
1984	329,232	139.4	10,990	4.7	173,634	73.5	144,609	61.2
1985	340,942	142.8	11,141	4.7	175,748	73.6	154,052	64.5
1986	376,064	156.0	12,181	5.1	186,174	77.2	177,710	73.7
1987	365,709	150.3	11,879	4.9	170,841	70.2	182,989	75.2
1988	385,934	157.0	12,553	5.1	181,352	73.8	192,029	78.1
1989	410,039	165.2	13,416	5.4	192,006	77.3	204,618	82.4
1990	492,671	198.1	15,025	6.0	233,973	94.1	243,673	98.0
1991	548,667	217.6	16,376	6.5	274,404	108.8	257,887	102.3
1992	565,575	221.7	16,204	6.4	271,009	106.2	278,362	109.1

Percent change, 1980-92

+40.3	+23.9	+12.6	0	+18.8	+5	+73	+53
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*Includes nonnegligent manslaughter.

Source: FBI, *Crime in the United States*, 1980-92

Table 2. Percent of murders,* robberies, and aggravated assaults in which firearms were used, 1980 to 1992

Year	Total for selected crimes		Murders*		Robberies		Aggravated assaults	
	Number	Percent with firearms	Number	Percent with firearms	Number	Percent with firearms	Number	Percent with firearms
1,980	1,226,810	32.0%	23,040	62.4%	548,810	40.3%	654,960	23.9%
1981	1,240,370	31.9	22,520	62.4	574,130	40.1	643,720	23.6
1982	1,207,942	30.8	21,010	60.2	536,890	39.9	650,042	22.4
1983	1,159,060	28.5	19,310	58.3	500,220	36.7	639,530	21.2
1984	1,189,050	27.7	18,690	58.8	485,010	35.8	685,350	21.1
1985	1,240,100	27.5	18,980	58.7	497,870	35.3	723,250	21.3
1986	1,397,710	26.9	20,610	59.1	542,780	34.3	834,320	21.3
1987	1,392,890	26.3	20,100	59.1	517,700	33.0	855,090	21.4
1988	1,473,740	26.2	20,680	60.7	542,970	33.4	910,090	21.1
1989	1,551,540	26.4	21,500	62.4	578,330	33.2	951,710	21.5
1990	1,717,570	28.7	23,440	64.1	639,270	36.6	1,054,860	23.1
1991	1,805,170	30.4	24,700	66.3	687,730	39.9	1,092,740	23.6
1992	1,823,210	31.0	23,760	68.2	672,480	40.3	1,126,970	24.7

Note: The rate is the number of crimes per 100,000 population. The number of gun crimes is an estimate.

*Includes nonnegligent manslaughter.

Source: FBI, *Crime in the United States*, 1980-92

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