

Gaps continue in firearm Surveillance: Evidence from a large U.S. city Bureau of Police

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Abstract

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While the broad relationship between violence, poor health outcomes and firearms is well-established, there is limited research in the public health field on the source of guns collected by police departments, many of which are used for violent crime that results in injury or death. This data could be valuable for purposes of improving surveillance around violent crime and health outcomes as well as for evaluating prevention strategies and future programs that aim to reduce gun violence.

The objectives of this study are to describe how guns come into police possession, identify the primary source of these guns, determine how guns leave possession of lawful owners, and determine disposition of guns and perpetrators. In order to meet the objectives, we analyzed data on 762 cases in which a gun was recovered by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police Firearm Tracking Unit (FTU). Descriptive analyses were conducted. Most cases involve a single perpetrator. Traffic stop and street patrol accounted for 31% of method of recovery. Most perpetrators were carrying a gun that did not belong to them – 79%. More than 30% of the guns recovered were reported stolen by owners when the FTU contacted them. For 44% of the guns, whether the gun was stolen was either unknown or not able to be determined. In most cases, individual owners did not know how they lost possession of their firearm (62 percent).

Currently there is no way to track firearms from a legal purchase into hands that do not have legal ownership even through official police data. A large number of guns recovered are taken from persons who are not the lawful owner of the gun. In the majority of cases, the guns were privately owned, as opposed to being traced back to a dealer. How the guns left the possession of their lawful owners is unknown, and collecting this data proves to be challenging. Future studies should be conducted to assess the pathway in which guns travel from legal to illegal ownership.

Keywords

Injury; Violence; Suicide; Firearms; Guns; Police

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