

**JUVENILE AND YOUNG ADULT FIREARM USE IN SOUTH CAROLINA:  
AN UPDATE AND REANALYSIS OF DATA**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **Executive Summary**

This project represents a collaborative effort between the South Carolina Department of Public Safety and the University of South Carolina, funded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics through the Justice Research and Statistics Association. It is a follow-up to and an expansion of, an earlier report, *Juvenile and Young Adult Firearm Use in South Carolina*. There were two sets of objectives for the original project. The first involved determining the extent to which firearms are involved in violent crimes committed by children and young adults, identifying key characteristics of those arrested for committing these crimes, identifying who was being victimized by these crimes, and discovering under what circumstances these crimes were being committed. The second set of objectives involved learning more about what motivates children to possess firearms in the first place, how they manage to acquire firearms, and what factors are associated with the decision to use or possess firearms. The purpose of this report is to expand upon the first set of objectives and to reanalyze the findings of the second set, with the goal of achieving a higher degree of confidence in the self-reported data. The first objectives were addressed by analyzing South Carolina Incident Based Reporting System (SCIBRS) data for an additional two years. The second set was addressed by employing validation techniques that allow for the identification and exclusion of suspect self-reported data. This report is organized on this basis, with the first section outlining the results of the additional SCIBRS data analysis, followed by the results and discussion of the validated survey analysis.

## **Acknowledgments**

The range of individuals who have contributed to this project goes well beyond the primary investigators--so much so that we fear that we will commit errors of omission as we offer our thanks. Accordingly, we apologize to anyone whom we have inadvertently omitted in our acknowledgments.

We owe special thanks to Flora Boyd, past-Director of the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Gina Wood, Director of DJJ, and the very dedicated staff at DJJ for their support and assistance throughout this project.

The assistance and support of Lt. Gerald Hamby of SLED and Scott Shealy of the University of South Carolina were vital to successfully accessing South Carolina's incident based crime data. Also, the project could not have been carried out without the ongoing help of Trudie Trotti of the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice. We greatly appreciate her assistance in the identification of potential participants, her valuable feedback regarding the interview instrument and procedures, and her help in obtaining critical case record information.

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Finally, we owe perhaps our largest debt to the youth at the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice for taking time to frankly discuss with us their experiences with and attitudes about firearms and other weapons.

## **Incident Based Analysis**

### **The Data**

The data presented here were drawn from SCIBRS, a data source operated and maintained by the South Carolina State Law Enforcement Division (SLED). These data are drawn from incident reports forwarded to SLED from local law enforcement agencies throughout South Carolina. All local law enforcement agencies in the state reported crime in this manner during the time period this analysis is based on, calendar years 1996 and 1997. This data source allows the user to identify and analyze key facts about the criminal event. The incident based analysis focused on firearm involvement among arrested juveniles (defined as 16 years old and younger, in conformance with state law) and arrested young adults (ages 17 through 20) arrested for the Index I violent offenses of murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault.

### **Study Limitations**

Juveniles represent a small (approximately 10%) of all arrests.

The analysis included only reported crimes, and crimes for which arrests occurred.

The analysis did not cover enough of a time span to establish trends.

Firearm violence means that a firearm was involved in the crime, but not necessarily that it was fired.

## Key Findings

Young adults used firearms in violent offenses (32%) more often than juveniles (18%).

Handguns were the guns most often used both by juveniles (67.9%) and young adults (76.4%).

The majority of murders by juveniles (72.5%) and young adults (83.6%) involved firearms.

Firearm use in violent crime increased with age, peaking at age 19.

Firearm violence occurred most often in the home, both for juveniles (33.6%) and young adults (36.7%).

Juvenile firearm violence occurred most often in the evenings (21.9%) and late at night (21.6%).

Juvenile firearm violence was more likely to occur later at night and in the early morning hours during the summer than when school was in session.

The victims of juvenile firearm violence were most often juveniles (27.1%) and young adults (20.6%).

The victims of juvenile firearm violence were most often black males (43.6%).

The victims of young adult firearm violence were most often young adults (36.4%).

The victims of young adult firearm violence were most often black males (45.4%).

The victims of juvenile firearm violence were most often known to the offender (39.8%), however victimization of family members was comparatively uncommon (4.7%).

The victims of young adult firearm violence were most often strangers (44%), while victimization of family members by young adult was also uncommon (3.7%).

## **Firearm Possession and Use Among Youth:**

### **Reanalysis of Findings From a Survey of Incarcerated Juveniles in South Carolina**

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to rising rates of youth violence and the nexus between illegal gun use and youth crime. Despite recent decreases in youths' involvement in violent crimes and weapons violations, rates of youth violence and illegal firearm use are still alarmingly high. In 1995, 2,300 juveniles were implicated in murders, and 79% of the victims in these homicides were killed with a firearm. Moreover, several recent deadly incidents involving firearms within schools have renewed the public's concerns about youths' use of firearms.

Research of firearm ownership among juveniles, which has largely focused on national surveys of urban populations of youth, indicates that firearms are readily available to youth in the United States. Those studies that have examined gun ownership and use among samples of incarcerated youth have, not surprisingly, found significantly higher rates of gun ownership and use than those involving general samples of school children.

Not only are firearms readily available to juveniles in the United States, but they are carried to school with disturbing frequency. For example, a national poll of sixth through twelfth graders conducted in 1993 indicated that 4% had carried a gun to school during the last year. In a study of youth in detention facilities in Seattle, 46% reported that they had carried a firearm to school.

Although relatively few researchers have examined youths' rationales for owning and

carrying guns, available data suggest that significant numbers of youth in urban areas possess guns for reasons associated with self-protection. However, at least one study of non-urban school children suggests that most possess firearms for reasons associated with sport. Importantly, several studies have shown that patterns of gun ownership vary significantly according to youths' criminal or antisocial behavior. Youth who own firearms for aggressive reasons or for protection tend to be more likely than those who own guns for sport (or those who do not own guns) to engage in antisocial or delinquent behaviors.

### **Purposes of the Study**

Existing research is somewhat limited in its scope, particularly with regards to youth in non-urban communities. Most studies of youth and guns have focused either on urban youth or on nationally-representative samples that do not permit examination of urban and non-urban trends. It was the purpose of the present research project to provide additional data regarding (a) the nature and extent of firearm use by juveniles, (b) their motivations for possessing these weapons, and (c) other factors related to weapon possession among a sample of incarcerated juveniles.

A second purpose of this study was the development of criteria to identify unreliable and invalid responses by participants. Self-reports of violent and other antisocial behavior have been criticized as potentially careless, exaggerated, or otherwise false. Recognizing this potential, and following recent trends in self-reported youth violence research, this study adopted rigorous screening procedures to identify invalid and unreliable responses and then delete those participants who provided such responses from a reanalysis of the data from the original study.



## **Method**

The initial sample of participants included 179 male youths who were incarcerated in a secure juvenile justice facility in South Carolina. Youths comprised three groups: (a) all youths who had current school weapons offenses (i.e., all youths who had a school weapons charge as one of their most recent offenses), (b) all youths who had current non-school-related weapons offenses, and (c) a random selection of youths who had no current weapons offenses.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, using a 92-item questionnaire that assessed youths' demographic characteristics and family background; history of past offenses; prevalence of firearm and other weapon ownership, possession, and use; ease of obtaining firearms; means of obtaining firearms; rationales for firearm use; firearm use by family members; self-reported victimization; school-related violence and antisocial behavior (including carrying firearms to school); antisocial behavior outside of school (including gang involvement); and attitudes about firearms. In addition, researchers obtained youths' permission to obtain data regarding their personal and offense histories from their computerized case records.

Following the administration of the individual interviews, all participants' responses were examined for inconsistencies (unreliable responses) and extreme answers (invalid responses) in order to identify participants who may have provided purposefully incorrect information during the interviews. In all, 39 participants (21.8% of the sample) were deleted, resulting in a final sample of 140 youths. Of the final sample, 49.3% had been referred for a weapons offense on at least one occasion, and 50.7% had never had such a referral.

## Key Findings

### *Demographic information*

Youths ranged in age from 12 to 18, with an average age of 16.1 years.

58% of the youths were African-American, 37% were white (non-Hispanic), 1% were Hispanic, 1% were Asian, and 3% were of mixed race.

Family incomes were quite low. Nearly half of participants' families earned less than \$10,000 annually; fewer than one quarter had yearly incomes in excess of \$20,000.

35% of participants lived with two parents prior to their incarceration; 41% lived with only one parent.

66% of participants lived in metropolitan counties prior to their confinement, 8% lived in non-rural counties, and 26% resided in rural counties.

### *Offense history*

Youths with a history of weapons referrals had significantly more delinquency referrals and received their first referral at a younger age than other youths.

Youths with weapons referrals were no more likely than other youths to have been referred for various categories of offenses, except for property offenses.

35% had spent time in a juvenile facility before.

### *Criminal status of family and friends*

According to official records, half of the participants had a parent or a sibling with a known juvenile or criminal record.

79% of the participants reported that people with whom they spent a lot of time (e.g., parents, other relatives, good friends) had been arrested for a crime.

72% said that such individuals had served time in a prison, jail, or juvenile correctional facility.

### *Weapon ownership, possession, and use*

Youths reported owning an average of 4.5 firearms prior to their referral to the juvenile facility. Those with a history of weapons referrals reported owning no more guns than other participants.

80% of the participants indicated that they had owned or possessed a handgun

Approximately 75% reported having carried a handgun

More than 25% reported having used a handgun to commit a crime.

Participants with a weapons referral were more likely than those with no referrals to have owned and carried handguns.

On average, youths reported carrying a gun “a few times a month.”

Youths with a record of weapons referrals carried guns significantly more frequently than other youths.

Participants reported having used a gun to commit a crime once or twice in their lives.

Youths with histories of weapons referrals were more likely than others to admit to having used guns to commit crimes.

Over one fifth of the sample reported having obtained a gun just to commit a crime. Those with a record of weapons offenses did so more frequently than other youths.

72% of participants indicated that it would not be difficult for them to obtain a gun upon release from the juvenile facility.

Prior to their confinement in the juvenile facility, youths obtained their handguns, rifles, and shotguns most frequently from friends and through illegal means (often from drug dealers or “junkies”), but many also obtained firearms from family members.

Self-protection and protection of family members were the most common reasons youths carried handguns and shotguns.

Youths most often carried rifles for hunting/target shooting and protection of family members.

A substantial minority of participants also cited the need for respect and the intention to commit crimes as important motivations for carrying firearms.

Those youths who cited hunting/target shooting as an important motivation for carrying firearms were *unlikely* to indicate that they had also carried weapons for criminal and/or antisocial reasons *or* for reasons of protection.

Youths reported having carried firearms to multiple public locations (in a car, on the street).

At least half indicated that it was likely they would carry a gun for protection, when going to a strange part of town, at night, when hanging out with friends, when they knew they others would be carrying guns, or when doing a drug deal.

More than one third reported that they had fired a gun while involved in illegal activities, defensive activities, or while socializing. These situations include self-defense, hanging out with friends, when horsing around, when drunk or high, to scare someone, during a fight, committing a crime, and during a drug deal.

Most youths either had been taught to use a gun by a relative, or were self-taught. Youth with weapons charges were most likely to have taught themselves, while those without weapons referrals were most likely to have been taught by a relative.

#### *Weapon use and possession by family members*

Prior to incarceration, over half the youths lived in homes in which at least one person, other than the youth, owned a gun.

Adult household members usually kept firearms for protection. Fathers also commonly owned firearms for purposes of hunting or sport.

85% of youths reported that at least some of their friends carried weapons outside of the home; 26% reported that family members had done so.

#### *Victim/witness experience*

79% of youths reported having friends who had been shot at.

71% had witnessed a wounding or killing by a weapon.

68% had been threatened with a gun.

68% had been shot at on at least one occasion.

Youths with a history of weapons offenses were more likely than others to have

witnessed someone being seriously wounded or killed by a weapon. Still, 68% of those without a record of weapons offenses reported witnessing such crimes.

#### *School-related violence and antisocial behavior*

35% of all youths reported that they had been threatened with a gun while at school or at a school activity

34% had been threatened with a knife

33% with another type of weapon

13% of participants said that they had skipped school because they were worried about violence.

Nearly two thirds reported that in the year prior to their confinement, they had known at least one student who had carried a gun to school.

27% of youths reported having carried a gun to school in the year prior to their confinement.

Approximately 10% reported hiding a gun in their school locker, 10% said that they had hidden a gun elsewhere at school, and 7% had a gun taken away at school.

25% of youths reported having threatened someone with a gun at school or at a school activity.

17% of youths reported having threatened someone with a knife while at school or at a school activity.

25% of youths reported having threatened someone with another type of weapon while at school or at a school activity.

Participants reported very high rates of suspension (96%) expulsion (76%), and truancy (nearly one third reported skipping more than ten days per month).

Youths with weapons referrals reported no more victimization, weapon-carrying, or antisocial behavior at school than did other youths.

#### *Antisocial behavior outside of school*

More than half of all participants reported having engaged in a wide variety of delinquent and antisocial behaviors. Youths with weapons referrals reported similar

rates of illegal drug-related behaviors and aggression against others, compared with youths who had no weapons referrals.

Nearly one quarter indicated that at least one family member had shot someone

55% reported that at least one close friend had shot someone.

Youths whose family and/or friends had shot someone reported a significantly greater frequency of aggression.

Almost one fifth of participants reported that they had been involved in gun dealing (buying selling, or trading guns). Youths with no weapons referrals reported being involved in as much gun dealing as youths with weapons referrals.

#### *Youths' attitudes toward weapons and violence*

Despite the prevalence of gun ownership and use among participants, most youths expressed a negative attitude toward using weapons and did not think that carrying weapons was important to being accepted and respected.

Participants were optimistic about their ability to reach their mid-twenties without having been seriously injured or killed. However, participants who were victims (or whose family or friends had been victimized) were less optimistic about their ability to avoid future victimization.

#### *Youths' involvement in gangs*

Nearly one third of the sample reported they had been a member of a gang at some point prior to incarceration. Most self-reported gang members indicated that their gangs had been involved in a wide range of aggressive and deviant behaviors.

Self-identified gang members were similar to non-gang members in many ways: residence (urban versus rural), weapons referrals, delinquency referrals, involvement in drug activity, attitudes towards using guns, family members' criminal records, and having family members who were involved in gun violence (as victims or perpetrators).

Gang members were more likely to: carry guns, fire guns in both aggressive and social activities, have friends who were victims or perpetrators of gun violence, report aggression toward others, admit to property offenses, and believe that carrying a gun is important to being accepted and respected by friends. Notably, gang members were more likely than their peers to believe they would be seriously injured or killed by the time they reach their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*Youths' recommendations for weapon strategies*

Most participants provided at least one suggested strategy for keeping kids from using weapons.

29% suggested prevention and early intervention initiatives (mentoring programs, violence prevention programs at school).

21% suggested stricter regulation of access to guns.

13% suggested increased parental involvement and supervision

7% suggested stricter punishments for weapons violations

5% suggested increased surveillance at school

4% suggested the need for safer neighborhoods

## **General Observations**

22% of the participants in the original sample met at least one of the 12 criteria for deletion, by providing extreme or inconsistent responses. Although the rigorous screening procedures do not eliminate the possibility of false or misleading responses, they likely increase the validity of the data.

Findings from this sample revealed that firearms were readily available to them and frequently carried by them prior to their confinement. These high rates of firearm possession and use are consistent with similar surveys of juvenile offenders.

There were a number of significant differences between youths who had a history of weapons offenses and those who did not. Youths with a history of weapons offenses had more referrals for juvenile offenses, reported engaging in more aggressive behaviors, carrying guns with the intention of engaging in criminal behavior, and using a gun in committing a crime.

Regardless of whether or not youth had ever been referred for a weapons offense, they reported high rates of carrying and firing weapons in a wide range of locations and circumstances.

Over half this sample come from homes in which at least one gun is present. Eighty-five percent report having friends who carry guns. These findings emphasize the importance of the family and peer involvement in any efforts to prevent illegal firearm use by juveniles. These findings are consistent with a wealth of other evidence linking family and peer relations with serious antisocial behavior.

Any effective prevention and intervention efforts that target high-risk youths must comprehensively address known risk factors across many contexts in which the youths interact (i.e., family, peer, school, and neighborhood).

Because youths with histories of weapons offenses were oversampled for the purpose of this study, this sample of participants likely is not representative of male youths at the juvenile correctional facility as a whole.