

## Bloomberg School of Public Health

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# Fact Sheet: Stolen Guns

### *The Role of Gun Theft in Arming Criminals*

- Surveys of gun owners suggest that approximately 500,000 guns are stolen each year from private citizens.<sup>1</sup> In addition, in 1998 and 1999, more than 27,000 firearms were reportedly stolen from licensed gun dealers and more than 3,700 firearms stolen from common carriers who transport guns.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, these stolen guns go directly into the hands of criminals.
- Data from a national survey of incarcerated criminals indicate the prominent role theft plays in arming criminals. When asked how they obtained their most recent firearm, 10% reported stealing it and an additional 8% reported buying it from a “fence” — someone who sells stolen goods.<sup>3</sup> But surveys of criminals clearly understate the importance of gun theft in arming criminals. Many of the individuals who sell guns to criminals also sell stolen goods. For example, 21% of armed criminals obtained guns from groups known to steal guns, such as drug dealers, addicts, and other street sources.
- More than a quarter of all guns connected with Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) investigations of illegal gun trafficking were reported to have been stolen.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Need for Mandatory Theft Reporting*

- In order to ensure accountability and deter illegal sales, licensed gun dealers are required by federal law to report all firearm thefts to the ATF.<sup>5</sup>
- Most criminals obtain their guns from illegal sales by private individuals. Maryland has adopted several laws to address this problem including limits on handgun sales to one per month, handgun registration, and a requirement that private handgun sellers ensure that prospective buyers pass the same criminal background check required of licensed dealers. Research on the enforcement of the private sale law indicates that police investigations are hindered by gun owners’ claims that their guns recovered from crimes were stolen.<sup>6</sup> Requiring gun owners to promptly report gun thefts to police, as some states do, minimizes this barrier to the effective prosecution of individuals who illegally sell guns to criminals.



## References

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2. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. *Commerce in Firearms in the United States*. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Washington, DC, February 2000.
3. Harlow, Caroline Wolf. *Firearm Use by Offenders: Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities*. Special Report from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, November 2001.
4. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. *Following the Gun: Enforcing Federal Laws Against Firearm Traffickers*. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Washington, DC, June 2000.
5. 18 U.S. C. § 923 (g) (6) (2002).
6. Frattaroli, Shannon. "Implementation of the Maryland Gun Violence Act of 1996." Doctoral dissertation, Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, 1999.

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