

Ways & Means Transcript– S3E3 – How Do Criminals Get Their Guns

Emily Hanford (EH): Hey, everyone! Emily here. Two things: if you like the show, we hope you'll review us on iTunes. We'd love to know who you are and why you listen- and a review does help others find the show, so thanks a lot. Also, please be advised, today's episode includes one instance of salty language, and graphic descriptions of gun violence. From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. I'm Emily Hanford.

Samuel (S): Oh, it's not hard to use a gun. All you got to do it pull the trigger.

EH: This is Samuel. He grew up in the Henry Horner Homes – an infamous housing project on the west side of Chicago. He says when he was a kid it was really easy to get access to guns.

S: The first time I held a gun, when some guys in the neighborhood would come over there and they would get ready to shoot dices. And they had their weapons on them and I asked 'em, "Hey 'scuse me, you want me to hold your gun for you? Until y'all get through?" They be like, "Yeah you can hold them." Then I end up having about 10 guns on me because everybody wanted me to hold their gun at that point. And it, like, fascinated me. You know? To see the gangsters in the neighborhood and you know I wanted to be a reflection of them. So, I was just flabbergasted to hold a gun, you know?

EH: He was a slight kid, with dimples. When he was holding all these guns for the guys playing dice, he was like 11, 12 years old.

S: I had them all around my waist, in my pants pocket, and I was sitting on the bench and just sitting back like, you know, "Look at me now," you know? Holding a gun is like that power- just by having it in your hand, it's power.

EH: Pretty soon, Samuel had his own gun.

S: I'd shoot out the window in the projects, I'd go to, like, the 15th floor and I shoot it up toward the sky. it was like getting, like, a buzzing sound in your ear, like- and after that first shot, you get you another one. Then it became fun at that point.

EH: Before he turned 15, Samuel says he'd shot someone – and been shot himself. The easy access to guns when he was a kid ended up changing his life. Coming up on this episode of Ways & Means: we're talking about where criminals get their guns, where all these guns are coming from, and what research says can be done to stop the illegal gun trade in the United States.

Samuel agreed to talk with us if we don't use his real name. We'll hear from him, along with Duke professor Philip Cook.

Philip Cook (PC): I've been tracking the underground gun market in the United States for the last 15 years.

EH: Phil is one of the top researchers on the costs and consequences of the widespread availability of guns in America. For one research project, Phil's team conducted interviews with inmates of one of the largest jails in the U.S.- the Cook County Jail in Chicago. Researchers went to the jail and asked the inmates– where do you get your guns?

PC: We talked to 99 of them. Most of them were awaiting trial and had a very open-ended conversation about their life with guns, including questions not only about how guns get into their neighborhood and what their experience with guns was, but how specifically did they obtain the last gun that they had.

EH: And this was kind of remarkable because-

PC: anything that they told us about how they got a gun was basically going to be a confession of a crime that they committed.

EH: Even so, Phil's team found the men very willing to talk— they were eager, he says, to share their "expertise." What his team found is that, while policymakers argue about things like background checks for legal gun purchases, criminals, for the most part, are not getting guns through legal means. Most of the young men the researchers talked to couldn't have legally owned a gun even if they wanted to— because they were too young, or because they already criminal records. They definitely didn't have a Firearm Owner's ID card, which is what you're supposed to have in Illinois.

PC: Most of them who had a gun said that they had gotten it from somebody they knew.

EH: Samuel explains how it works.

S: You know, you tend to find a connection in the neighborhood from older guys that was a part of your gang. You know, they made it to the point where easy for you to get a gun

EH: Phil Cook says that in many urban neighborhoods, kids get guns pretty much the same way an underage kid in any neighborhood in American gets a beer.

PC: Think about: how does an 18-year-old get a beer? The answer is somebody they know, who maybe is willing to go to the store and buy them the six-pack, might charge them a dollar or two for the service, and if you don't happen you're an 18-year-old it doesn't happen to know anybody in the family or around that is willing to do that for you, you're out of luck.

EH: In the Chicago neighborhood where Samuel grew up, there were plenty of people around who could get you a gun.

S: It's very easy. I mean, just like you go and order beer, you know, you go ask one of your gang members say, "Hey you need a gun." And being that they're much older than you, they knew exactly where to go get the guns from. You didn't have to pay because whoever was in your gang, that's really leading the gang, they would have that connection so you didn't have to pay for no gun because it was just plentiful, you know

EH: One of the things Phil and his team learned from their research is that guns are not a money-making business for the gangs in Chicago.

PC: They might acquire guns and keep them in the stash and pass them around within the membership, but this was not a business proposition for them.

EH: So, even though there are plenty of guns around, you can't just walk into one of these neighborhoods and buy one. And when guys do sell the guns to outsiders, it's only to certain kinds of outsider. Here's Phil talking about one of those interviews at the Cook County Jail. The interviewer was talking to a black man in his 20's.

PC: So, the interviewer asked him, like he asked all of our respondents, "If you were to sell a gun, would you be careful about who you sold it to?" And the respondent said, "Oh you know I'd sell to pretty much anybody." And then the interviewer, this 50 something white guy, says "Well, would you sell it to me?" And the respondent laughed and he said, "Not you, man!"

EH: Too much of a risk that a 50-something white guy was an undercover cop.

PC: The interviewer asked, "Well, would you ever be willing to sell to a stranger if you were selling guns?" And the respondent said, "Yeah, sometimes we're willing to sell to a stranger but we have to do a background check first." And he used that exact term, which I was very tickled by.

EH: Turns out, if you're not in a gang, it could take weeks, even months to get a gun.

PC: If they're just a freelance robber, for example, they might have a great deal of trouble getting a gun. And, in fact, most robberies in Chicago do not involve guns, suggesting that the robbers don't have them- or else why wouldn't they use them along the way?

EH: Okay, so there are lots of guns on the streets of Chicago, and if you're from the neighborhood, if you're part of a network- you can easily get your hands on one, or 10, like Samuel did before he was even a teenager. But where do all these guns come from in the first place?

Reporter: On the Southside of Chicago, in the city's most dangerous neighborhood of Englewood, brazen criminals sometimes hit a gangster's jackpot. Shiny new guns in transit, inside a sitting train car. The ATF says, since 2013, more than 150 guns were stolen from freight trains. In one instance, thieves got their hands on more than 100 new Rugers.

EH: This is news footage describing one way guns get into Chicago- street gangs break into rail yards and rob freight trains full of guns headed to stores and gun shows.

Tio Hardiman (TH): There are many avenues where the guns come from.

EH: This is Tio Hardiman. He's been trying to stop gun violence in Chicago for years, first with a group called "CeaseFire," and now with one called "Violence Interruptors." He says he's seen it all when it comes to how criminals get access to guns in his city.

Tio: Number one, you have a lot of "straw purchases" where people go out and purchase their guns from out of state- you know, at some of these gun shows like In Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama. And a lot of guys are selling guns out of their trunks before you even get into the gun show, and there's no real background check or screening of the individuals who purchase the gun, so- and they come and people go buy the guns and they bring them back to the city and sell them to young men, you know, like on the south and west sides of Chicago.

EH: And these guns can be really powerful.

S: Oh, I had shotguns, I done have handguns, I done have Uzis, I done have carbines.

EH: A carbine- or, as others say, a carbyne- is a light automatic rifle. Samuel says, as a teenage gang member, he had access to a huge variety of guns. And when the gang was talking about guns, the code word they used was "toy."

S: Oh it was a real gun, but we just called them a toy. Sometimes we might- if we don't say "toy" we might give it a name. "Go get 'Dirty Harry' or something" or, you know, you just create your own name, but people didn't know what you talking about.

EH: But these guns are anything but toys. And, while some gun rights advocates argue that it's people who kill people, not guns who kill people, Phil Cook says it's the criminal's choice of weapon often determines if a victim lives or dies.

PC: There are no drive-by knifings for, example, 90%+ of officers who are killed are killed with a gun. And all of our presidents who have been assassinated were killed with a gun.

EH: And, of course, mass killings.

PC: The type of weapon matters a lot. That's a controversial statement. Believe it or not- it seems like common sense. If you make it easier to kill somebody, you're going to have more deaths. But, for people who resist the idea that that type weapon matters, they take the view that whether the victim lives or dies is simply a reflection of the intention of the assailant. And if the assailant is deprived of a high-powered pistol, for example, then they'll make do with some other type of weapon and do whatever is necessary to see the job done. And that that is a myth. It's a belief based on no evidence, and every bit of evidence we have would point in the other direction.

EH: By the time Samuel was 14, he was doing gang "security"- as he calls it- standing watch with a gun, making sure kids from rival gangs didn't enter his territory. And that's when he got shot for the first time.

S: Me and one of my best friend - we had been drinking that night. And we had been out there, in front of the building, protecting the building all day. So, we decided to go get us a 40-ounce. So, we go to my sister's house, and I told him to get me the gun so I could put the gun up. And he didn't want to give me the gun, so we was tussling with the gun. I said, "You know what? Let's stop right now before somebody gets shot."

EH: His friend said, "Okay, sure, I'll stop." But he didn't give the gun back. Samuel went to sit on his bed, and that's when he says his friend began playing Russian roulette.

S: And I say, "Hey, man, don't point that at me." You know? So, he pointed it at me. And, when I reached to try to grab it from him at that point, he clicked it and it say "POW!" Real loud, and when I look up, I had been shot through both of my legs. And I was like "Man, homey, you just shot me." You know? So now he started panicking. Talkin' bout, "Oh no, I done shot you, I done shot you." I asked the paramedic, I'll never forget, I say, "Man I'm about to die right now?" And they was like, "No, we gonna save you this time."

EH: But it didn't end there. Even though Samuel knew the shooting was an accident, he didn't want to look weak if he didn't retaliate.

S: I said to myself, "If I let this go on the neighborhood, where he shot me like that, and all the stuff I done been into, throughout the neighborhood," I felt it would be open season where people just be shootin' me at will.

EH: Samuel also wanted his friend to give him some money to cover his medical bills. When he got out of the hospital, Samuel called his friend, and said “Let’s meet, just us.”

S: So, we go to the park and I say, “Hey I'ma forgive you for you shooting me, but you got to pay for all the time I spent in the hospital.” And he say, “Man, I'm not going to pay you because it's going to make me look like a bitch.” And I said, “How you think I'm looking walking around with holes in both for my legs? I mean how you think I look?” He was like, “Man, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to pay you.”

EH: This really bugged Samuel. They talked for a while and, finally, Samuel’s friend agreed to meet again the next day—not to pay Samuel money, but to receive payback for the shooting. The friend thought Samuel would give him a beating, or something. Instead, Samuel pulled out his gun.

S: He was shocked. He saw me when I pulled the gun out and he was like- the expression on his face was like, his eyes got big, you know? And I shot him just like he shot me. Just like I got the holes in my legs, I gave him the same thing: holes in his legs.

EH: None of this would have happened if these teenagers had not had such easy access to guns. So, what to do about this? One thing that’s clear from Phil Cook’s research is that something needs to be done to stop the flow of guns into urban neighborhoods like the one Samuel grew up in. And lawmakers can do something about this. For example, laws designed to regulate legal gun sales can significantly affect the underground market. After Maryland passed a Firearm and Safety act in 2013, 41% of surveyed parolees in the state reported that it was more difficult to get a handgun. And a study of over three decades of data on handguns recovered in Boston shows that fewer guns are illegally obtained from states where people are restricted to legally buying just one gun a month. Phil also wants better regulation of gun dealers.

PC: Because, sometimes it is the dealers who are dealing under the counter with customers who cannot legally buy a gun. And there's a very light regulation right now of dealers and that would help.

EH: And here’s something else that could help- this comes from Phil’s research on how criminals get guns in urban neighborhoods.

PC: When a gang member or another dangerous person gets picked up and has a gun, there needs to be a lot of questions asked about where that gun came from, what their source is, and perhaps even the willingness to deal with them, so that they might be able to make a second arrest of the source of the gun who was complicit in what is almost surely an illegal transaction.

EH: Phil Cook argues that if detectives spent time tracking down the history of the gun, law enforcement could tap into the social networks we’ve been talking about. And, rather than simply catching one perp with one gun, cops might ultimately be able to arrest the person who sold that gun- and presumably other guns- into the underground market. Doing this again and again, Phil Cook says law enforcement could begin to chip away at the stream of guns coming into neighborhoods like Samuel's. When he was 20, Samuel was convicted of murdering a rival gang member. He spent his 20s, 30s and early 40s behind bars. Now he’s back in Chicago. Some things have changed– the Henry Horner housing project where he grew up was demolished, and he lives in another neighborhood now. But there are still plenty of guns on the streets. And, as powerful as the guns were that he had as a teen, Samuel says that on the street are even more powerful today, because he hears them all the time.

S: The guns that they have on the street now- they are so powerful it makes it back in the day look like child's play. Because the stuff they have out there is almost like the stuff they would have in the military. They so powerful you can hear them like six to seven blocks away, and it would seem like they right in front of you, The bang is so- it freezes you, you know, because you would think that they actually there, but they are not there, they six or seven blocks away.

EH: Samuel says he talks frankly with kids in the neighborhood about how guns changed his life.

S: And when I tell a story, they listen. But, like, I tell them, "You know, I can talk to you until I'm blue in the face, and I'm not trying to tell you how to live your life. Because at the end of the day that's your life, you're responsible for any and everything that you do. So, if you put yourself in a situation like I was in, just know you're going to be the one who have to pay the price."

EH: But, if law enforcement and policymakers could make some simple changes to block the sheer number of guns entering our cities, kids like the ones Samuel talks to might have a much better chance of living lives not marked by violence— either as victims, or as perpetrators. Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones and Karen Kemp. Special thanks to Samuel for participating in this podcast. We recorded him at WBEZ, Chicago. Phil Cook is the ITT/Terry Sanford Professor Emeritus of Public Policy Studies at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke. His books include "Gun Violence: The Real Costs", and "The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know". To read some of his research on underground gun markets, visit our website: waysandmeansshow.org. Tio Hardiman is running for governor of Illinois. His platform includes a focus on reducing gun violence. Our assistant producers are Thamina Stoll and Cristina García Ayala. Cristina also creates original art for each episode. Johnny Vince Evans is our engineer. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

PC: And my mother when she was still alive and living by herself out in this rural area had a 22 rifle. And one evening her house was broken into and the rifle was not taken at the time but the next day she handed it over to the police department and she gave it to the sheriff and her rationale was the next time she got broken into she did not want that gun to be stolen and end up in the underground gun market. So she was way ahead of me in her thinking about this.