

# What happens to stolen guns?

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Only about one per cent of all gun transactions in the US are thefts, and there is no evidence that theft is an important source of guns to those who use them to commit violent crimes. In an analysis of nationwide and state-specific data in Springer's *Journal of Urban Health*, Philip Cook of Duke University in the US emphasizes that what happens to stolen guns has not been studied systematically. New data from Chicago demonstrates that only a tiny proportion of crime guns in that city were ever reported stolen to the Police Department. That and other evidence challenge the popular belief that crimes are mostly committed using stolen weapons.

The research drew on the best available evidence on how many guns are stolen each year in the US, and the extent to which these are then used to commit further offences. Cook used publicly available national data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, and information from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and other federal agencies. He also scrutinized data about guns reported stolen to the Chicago Police Department, as well as surveys conducted among convicted felons.

On average 232,400 guns were stolen nationwide between 2005 and 2010, and 251,300 weapons between 2010 and 2014. Residential burglaries accounted for 58 per cent of such thefts between 2005 and 2010, and the most common type of gun stolen was the handgun. Cook put these statistics in the context of all gun transactions and showed that gun thefts represented only about one per cent of the 32 million gun transactions nationwide.

Cook's analyses of data obtained from the University of Chicago Crime Lab showed that 4,010 gun thefts were reported to the Chicago Police Department between 2010 and 2016, averaging 573 per year. One in every two reports included a serial number and manufacturer name. In 2016, 84 (1.5 per cent) of the stolen guns could be matched to one of the more than 5,600 crimes committed in Chicago that year. Taking account of the missing data on half of the stolen guns, it is reasonable to conclude that 3% of recovered guns had been reported stolen.

One in every five guns reported as stolen were likely to be recovered again, usually following an arrest for illegal carrying. Less than half of perpetrators picked up with a stolen gun already had a criminal record that included violent offences.

"The tentative results tend to support a conclusion that stolen guns play only a minor role in [crime](#)," says Cook, who notes that surveys of convicted felons indicated that they rarely stole the guns they used.

Cook says the current findings are consistent with evidence from other studies that found that theft is relatively rare as a means of directly providing active criminals with guns. Most of the convicted criminals interviewed indicated that they either bought, traded, shared or were given the weapons they used to commit an offence.

While these findings are based on the best available data, those [data](#) have limitations and further research is necessary. "Even if gun [theft](#) is not the largest contributor to gun violence, it still does play some role, and it is prudent to consider what authorities could do to combat it," says Cook.

To this end he cites proposals for stronger state legislation that requires licensed gun dealers to adopt stricter security measures at their establishments, and gun owners to secure their weapons from being stolen from their homes and vehicles. More comprehensive plans could

include the development of smart guns that can only be fired by their owners, or guns equipped with tracking devices.

**More information:** Philip J. Cook, Gun Theft and Crime, *Journal of Urban Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s11524-018-0253-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-018-0253-7)

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