

# Would-be purchasers of firearms in Baltimore's underground gun market face obstacles

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A small survey conducted by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that more than half of respondents who reported having attempted to acquire a firearm in Baltimore's underground firearm market in the prior six months were unsuccessful— some due to lack of financial means, and others reporting they had no trusted point of contact for acquiring guns through unlawful means.

The findings, published online in the journal *Violence and Gender*, provide a description of motivations for involvement among those with experience trying to obtain a gun in Baltimore's underground gun market.

Underground gun markets, or gun sales that occur outside of lawful transfers, can create opportunities for prohibited or high-risk individuals to obtain access to guns. Gun violence often involves individuals who are prohibited from legally possessing firearms because of criminal history, restraining orders, or age. Previous research has found that more than 40 percent of people incarcerated for crimes with guns obtained those guns from the street or underground market.

"Understanding the underground market—how firearms are purchased, stolen, traded, or sold—can help provide a roadmap to prevent a prohibited person's access to guns," says lead author Cassandra Crifasi,

Ph.D., MPH, deputy director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research and assistant professor in the Bloomberg School's Department of Health Policy and Management.

For the study, the researchers surveyed 195 men on probation and/or parole in Baltimore, Maryland in 2016 to understand how individuals obtain and transfer firearms in underground gun markets. Of these, 58, or 30 percent, reported attempting to acquire a gun in the underground market in the prior six months.

Within this subgroup of 58 respondents, the majority reported having access to a handgun as compared to other types of firearms. Thirty-one percent of the subgroup (18) said there were employees at certain gun shops who would allow off-record purchases and/or straw purchases, when someone acquires a gun and gives it to someone else. In addition, almost a quarter of respondents—24 percent—who tried to get a gun in the last six months reported that there are certain gun shops in Maryland where it is easier to get a gun without [background checks](#), and 16 percent said there were gun shops where it was easier to steal guns.

Sixty percent (35 of 58) reported selling or trading a gun, with the majority (69 percent) selling or trading for money, 46 percent for drugs, and 23 percent for other guns. The two most frequently reported reasons for being unsuccessful acquiring a gun in the underground market were not having a trusted source (42 percent) or resources to pay for one (23 percent).

Baltimore's murder rate in 2015—the year immediately preceding the study survey—was at that time the highest in the city's history. According to Baltimore Police Department data, 87 percent of the city's homicides were committed with firearms in 2015. Previous research has shown that policies that reduce high-risk individuals' access to firearms can reduce violence, and policies that improve [firearm](#) seller

accountability can be effective at reducing diversion of guns for criminal use. In 2013, the Maryland passed the Firearm Safety Act, legislation with several components that could potentially reduce diversion of guns into the hands of prohibited persons, including permit-to-purchase laws for handguns, which include background checks and fingerprinting, expanding authority for state police to act against gun dealers who violate state [gun sales](#) laws, and banning the sale of assault rifles.

"We frequently hear that gun laws infringe upon a law-abiding citizen," says Crifasi. "However, our findings challenge that narrative and suggest that laws that focus on supply-side constraints—like permit-to-purchase laws—might actually be effective in preventing individuals who are prohibited from getting a gun, especially in times of increased violence."

The researchers recruited participants in public spaces directly outside seven parole and probation centers across Baltimore, Maryland, from May to August 2016. Participants were included if they were male, age 18 or older, currently on probation or parole, and living in Baltimore city. Participants, who were compensated with a gift card, answered questions about 1) access to and desire for guns; 2) gun-purchasing activities; 3) gun-selling activities; and 4) the number and types of guns to which they had access. Researchers identified 216 participants and used 195 survey responses for their analysis.

Eighty percent of the total sample of 195 individuals identified as African American, 74 percent were unemployed, and 63 percent reported being shot at least one time. Fifty-two participants, or 27 percent of the total sample, had access to a gun through direct ownership or borrowing. Of the 137 survey participants who reported not having access to a gun in the prior six months, more than a quarter, 27 percent (38), wanted to get one, with 31, or 81 percent, reporting safety or protection as the main reasons for wanting a gun.

"Understanding the context for why an individual wants a gun is key," says Crifasi. "Since safety was a main motivator for individuals wanting a gun, efforts that focus on preventing and responding to violence, improving police and community relationships, and increasing feelings of safety may lead to fewer people to feel the need to acquire guns through an underground [market](#)."

"Baltimore's Underground Gun Market: Availability of and Access to Guns" was written by Cassandra K. Crifasi, Shani A. L. Buggs, Marisa D. Booty, Daniel W. Webster and Susan G. Sherman.

**More information:** Cassandra K. Crifasi et al, Baltimore's Underground Gun Market: Availability of and Access to Guns, *Violence and Gender* (2020). [DOI: 10.1089/vio.2019.0054](https://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2019.0054)

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