

## GUN CONTROL SAVES LIVES

Regulating criminal access to handguns can be effective in making it more difficult for youths and criminals to obtain guns, according to a new study based on interviews with gang members and illicit gun dealers in two high-crime neighbourhoods in Chicago.

The research, which is published in the November 2007 issue of *The Economic Journal*, indicates that gun restrictions can make a real difference in reducing the death rate from violent crime.

'The common perception is that handguns are everywhere, like grains of sand on the beach', says **Philip Cook**, a Duke University public policy professor and co-author of the study. 'We find that isn't true. Guns are quite scarce in some American cities, and scarcity reduces gun use in crime.'

The study involves a detailed economic analysis of underground gun markets in Chicago, where handgun ownership was banned in 1982. Because Chicago's gun laws are unusually restrictive, the city provides a useful laboratory for examining the difference that government regulations can make.

The study contrasts the underground market for guns, which has relatively few transactions and high risk, with the market for illicit drugs, where there is a high volume of transactions and relatively little enforcement pressure.

Despite falling overall crime rates since the 1990s, America's homicide rate remains four times higher than that of England and Wales. Firearms are involved in two-thirds of America's 18,000 annual homicides. By contrast, only 10% of homicides involve guns in England and Wales, where access to firearms is severely restricted. The estimated annual cost to society of gun violence in the United States is \$100 billion.

One of the study's co-authors, Sudhir Venkatesh of Columbia University, conducted more than 500 interviews with gang members, gun dealers, prostitutes, police, professional thieves and public school security guards in two high-crime South Side Chicago neighbourhoods in order to learn about prices, waiting times and other details of the illegal gun market.

His interviews describe a black market in which criminals, unable to find a gun, sometimes hire brokers – and even they fail to complete a transaction 30-40% of the time. When guns do change hands, they are often of poor quality and sold at high prices. Ammunition is similarly hard to come by.

Surprisingly, although buyers could avoid these obstacles by sending a girlfriend or other proxy to the suburbs to obtain guns legally from licensed dealers, the researchers find no indication of that happening.

A high percentage of Chicago homicides are gang-related, and gang members can obtain guns more easily than non-members. Gang leaders control the supply of weapons to their members in order to avoid bringing attention to the gang by the police.

Drug dealers have little motivation to branch out into gun sales, because there is not much money to be made there and considerable risk of a crackdown by the Chicago police, who have long placed a high priority on interdicting illegal guns.

The research team also examined US Department of Justice data collected from interviews with arrestees in 22 other cities, including Washington and New York. The data generally support the conclusions drawn from the interviews in Chicago, suggesting that illegal gun market forces are similar in other large cities that have stringent handgun restrictions.

Professor Cook concludes:

‘Overall, these findings provide some basis for hope. We have not lost the battle against gun misuse. Restricting criminal access to handguns is an important tool for saving lives.’

ENDS

**Notes for editors:** ‘Underground Gun Markets’ by Philip Cook, Jens Ludwig, Sudhir Venkatesh and Anthony Braga is published in the November 2007 issue of *The Economic Journal*.

Philip Cook is at Duke University. Jens Ludwig is at Georgetown University. Sudhir Venkatesh of Columbia University. Anthony Braga is at Harvard University.

**For further information:** contact Philip Cook on +1-919-613-7360 (email: pcook@duke.edu); or Romesh Vaitilingam on 07768-661095 (email: romesh@compuserve.com).