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## **Identifying Illegal Firearm Market Acquisition Patterns**

### Final Report

by

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## Executive Summary

This research presents the results of a qualitative survey of 20 incarcerated and nonincarcerated illicit firearm market consumers in Quebec. Its general aim is to identify key acquisition patterns for illegal firearms. 'Illegal firearms' are defined as all firearms that are proscribed by Canadian law and all firearms (legal or illegal) that are acquired through prohibited or unofficial channels. Two specific objectives extend from this general aim: 1) to gather data on individual level experiences in the illegal firearm market and 2) to generalize these individual experiences so as to establish a projection of the scope and shape of the illegal firearm market. Meeting these objectives will help Public Safety Canada meet its own needs established in the 2004 *Investments to Combat the Criminal Use of Firearms Initiative*. This initiative was designed to improve the national collection, analysis, and sharing of firearms-related intelligence and information to enhance the capacity of law enforcement agencies to counter gun crime and the smuggling and trafficking of firearms. Research on gun crime issues is a component of the Initiative, in order to assist in the development of appropriate policy and relevant operational approaches and strategies.

The present report includes two general sections. In the first section, past research on illegal firearm markets within and beyond the Canadian context is reviewed and highlighted for its principal findings and conclusions. The second section follows up on this research review by inquiring upon these past findings and other components lacking in past research on illegal firearm markets with an analysis of the interview material that was obtained from the twenty men who shared their experiences acquiring firearms through a variety of illegal channels. This second section is followed by the principal highlights and conclusions from this research (which are also presented in the current summary) and by a series of recommendations that should be considered by anyone interested in addressing the illegal firearm market problem.

What past research on illegal firearm markets has taught us is that, regardless of cultural, national, and legislative boundaries distinguishing the context in which studies

were conducted, illegal firearm markets across various settings have generally markedly similar patterns. This is not to say that no distinctions emerge across such boundaries. There are specific features that distinguish illegal firearm markets from one geographical setting to the next. In some areas, individuals acquire illegal firearms primarily through family or friendship channels. In other areas, drug dealers and criminal milieu contacts are more prominent than family and friends. Prices may also vary across geographical settings, but there is little research at the moment to establish any clear and certain pattern. The point, here, is that the general commonalities across settings are more important to consider than the specific and essentially minor distinctions. The most important of these general patterns emerging from past research are the following: 1) illegal firearms are generally acquired within an informal relational context in that buyers and sellers are often friends, relatives, or trusting contacts and rarely central and professionalized point sources; 2) illegal firearm consumers generally have multiple channels of acquisition and intermediaries are often present in transactions, thus increasing the number of options for all parties involved; 3) illegal firearms are often acquired within unplanned, opportunistic sequences of events and not necessarily through well-thought out and organized searches; 4) illegal firearms may be acquired for a variety of reasons (e.g., fun, crime, good deals), but the most important motivation across research is self-protection; 5) the informal nature of illegal firearms transactions, the high number of unplanned opportunities, and the variety of motivations (particularly self-protection) make illegal firearms an attractive commodity for a wide array of consumers and not simply an exclusive tool for hard-core offenders and organized crime or gang members; 6) while the illegal firearm market is filled with cheap and small calibre firearms, consumers generally prefer guns that are accurate, well made and of high firepower and calibre—what consumers acquire, of course, is conditional to the pool of firearms that is accessible to them at any given planned or opportunistic moment.

The interview sessions confirmed most of these general patterns emerging from past research. Informal channels of acquisition were indeed the norm. Multiple channels of acquisition were in place for most of the respondents. Intermediaries were prominent actors in most transactions. Opportunistic transactions were prevalent across all

respondents' experiences. Protection was an important motivation for some respondents, particularly amongst the more serious offenders in the sample, but not as prominent as it was in past research. Instead, several respondents explained that they often acquired their firearms because they realized that it was a good deal, because they were passionate collectors and ready to invest in serious guns, or simply because they were attracted to the style, look, and feel of the weapon. Not only were serious offenders regular consumers of firearms. The sample was comprised of younger and older offenders, from rural and urban backgrounds, and who had been incarcerated for a variety of crimes. Furthermore, almost half of the sample was comprised of illegal firearm consumers who had never been incarcerated. They were free and passionate firearm collectors who were ready to acquire through illegal channels if it meant getting a gun that was difficult or impossible to obtain through legal means. While the more organized offenders reported more consistent access to illegal firearms, most respondents reported having little problems finding a gun. Respondents also shared experiences in which we were able to assess how tastes develop as a consumer becomes increasingly knowledgeable of firearms and how the more serious and well-made firearms gain preference over the abundance of cheaper and common guns that are available.

Aside from confirming these patterns from past research, the interview material also revealed results that have yet to emerge in previous investigations on illegal firearm markets. In terms of access to illegal firearms, while most respondents acquired their firearms through close and trusting contacts, some did share experiences involving point sources, particularly those operating on Native reserves around the Montreal area. While such dealers attract much attention within law-enforcement and media circles, the few respondents who did have past contacts acquiring (or trying to acquire) a firearm from these off-market dealers described how difficult it was to establish initial contacts with them. Some respondents waited months before they were able to solidify a reliable buyer-supplier relationship and those respondents who did access such point sources with considerable ease generally did so through their criminal contacts. It remains that, for the typical illegal firearm consumer, Native reserve dealers are neither common nor easily accessed suppliers. As mentioned above, such central suppliers were not the most

prominent type of sources for firearms. This is not simply because of the difficulties to access them, but largely because respondents were already well exposed to a variety of channels to acquire firearms. An analysis of the personal networks revealed during each of the interviews that only a few respondents had closed networks that were limited to one or two suppliers and that most were able to acquire illegal firearms through open or brokered networks that put them into contact with a multitude of suppliers (in open networks) or a reliable set of intermediaries (in brokered networks). This was the case for both free and incarcerated respondents in the sample. That open and brokered networks were more prominent suggests that even if key suppliers are removed from the market by law-enforcement efforts, consumers will be able to adjust rather quickly by turning to any of the channels that are accessible to them.

An analysis of choice structuring properties and prices revealed that consumers are largely dependent on what is available within their network at the time of the transaction. This, however, varied with the level of experience and knowledge that respondents had during their respective acquisitions. More experienced and passionate acquirers were ready to wait lengthy periods and pay hefty prices for the firearm they wanted. This was particularly the case with the free respondents who were avid gun collectors. But for the most part, respondents simply took what was available and paid what they felt was the going price for a particular gun. Some distinctions were revealed, however, in certain opportunistic events in which the respondent found himself with considerable bargaining power over the individual supplying the gun who was either in debt to the respondent or in strong need of drugs. Of course, such privileged situations typically occurred with respondents who were heavily involved in drug trafficking contexts. This was not the case for most respondents, as it is not for most offenders.

A final analysis concentrated on the whereabouts of the firearms that were discussed throughout the interviews. While a quarter of the guns were seized by the police and a small portion (4%) were destroyed or discarded by the respondent himself, another quarter were put back into circulation and almost half of the guns are still in the respondents' possession.

Such results are important to consider when determining policy and law-enforcement practices that are intended to contain the illegal firearm market. What may come as a surprise for most law-enforcement and policy actors, respondents knew very little about the background of the guns they acquired and inquired minimally on whether they had been used in previous crimes. They were, however, careful to distance themselves from those guns that they personally used in crimes. Curious precautionary measures were also revealed by those respondents who were not incarcerated and not involved in crimes (beyond the illegal firearm transaction, of course). While their participation in the illegal firearm market was based on their decisions to circumvent the legal firearm registration process which was perceived as slow and burdensome and their motivation to add to their collections specific types of guns that were prohibited within the Canadian context, they were also careful to remain active in the legal firearm market by purchasing and registering a new gun so as to demonstrate that they were still following the rules. While we see no way of identifying such acquirers who overlap the legal and illegal firearm markets, the experiences that they revealed do suggest that the illegal market is frequented by much more than the offending population. This, of course, is typical of most black and underground market economies.

It remains, however, that while these new results are indeed instructive, the small and nonrepresentative sample that was used for this study renders such findings tentative and requires that they must be further scrutinized by more extensive survey research in such matters.

## Report

Public Safety Canada has recognized the need for a study on illicit firearm acquisition patterns in Canada. This need is an extension of the *Investments to Combat the Criminal Use of Firearms Initiative* that was established in 2004 to improve the national collection, analysis, and sharing of firearms-related intelligence and information to enhance the capacity of law enforcement agencies to counter gun crime and the smuggling and trafficking of firearms. Research on gun crime issues is a component of the Initiative, in order to assist in the development of appropriate policy and relevant operational approaches and strategies.

The general objective of the present research is to conduct a qualitative survey of 20 incarcerated and nonincarcerated illicit firearm market consumers in Quebec. The specific aim is to identify key acquisition patterns for illegal firearms. 'Illegal firearms' are defined as all firearms that are proscribed by Canadian law and all firearms (legal or illegal) that are acquired through prohibited or unofficial channels. Two specific objectives extend from this general aim: 1) to gather data on individual level experiences in the illegal firearm market and 2) to generalize these individual experiences so as to establish a projection of the scope and shape of the illegal firearm market. Meeting these objectives will help guide policy makers and law-enforcement officials in their efforts to address and contain this phenomenon.

Within the scope of these objectives, the research will address, at a minimum and where information allows:

- the various national and provincial sources for acquiring firearms from the illegal market;
- general information on illegal firearms use, purpose of acquisition, price, participants' backgrounds, reason for acquiring an illegal rather than a legal firearm, as well as influence on acquisition channel;
- implications of firearms controls on sources;

- the predominant method and determinants of exchange, such as cash, commodities, barter, social obligation;
- patterns of resale of illegally acquired firearm;
- the extent and shape of social network acquisitions;
- impact of firearms classification (non-restricted, restricted, prohibited) on social networks and acquisition patterns;
- impact of the history of the firearm's usage (i.e. used in a crime versus not used in a crime);
- rural/urban differences or similarities;
- presence and prevalence of networks where individuals are unacquainted compared to personal network use for acquisition;
- indications of key elements for intervening in the illegal firearms market.

The present report presents a research of review of past studies on illegal firearm markets and an analysis of interviews with inmates who shared their experiences with illegal firearm acquisitions.

### **Review of Research**

Most research in Canada is designed to assess the impact of past firearm legislation on violent crime trends. There is little research on illegal firearms in Canada and acquisition patterns within this market. The present research initiates this line of inquiry by reviewing past studies that have partially addressed illegal or crime gun acquisition patterns in Canada and more extensive research in this area from the United States and other countries. Such research is nevertheless relevant for the Canadian context, particularly when we consider that the patterns that shape illegal markets are more likely to transcend political borders.

Indeed, there are key patterns that appear across different countries and cultural settings. Much of this research may be guided by a seminal survey that took place almost

three decades ago. According to the results from Wright and Rossi's (1986) survey of close to 2000 inmates in American prisons, the firearm market is driven primarily by informal interactions in which buyers and sellers generally operate through "off-the-record" transactions. Such transactions take place mostly with used firearms, in local settings, and within short time spans. The informal feature of illegal firearm markets is consistent with two studies that gathered survey data on such matters in the Canadian context. Both focused on illegal acquisitions in Quebec. The first study was the subject of a doctoral dissertation, which focused exclusively on juvenile offenders (Longtin 1999). The second was based on a small set of qualitative interviews with adult inmates who shared their experiences acquiring illegal firearms before their incarceration periods (Morselli 2002). In both studies, the prominence of informal networks as channels of acquisition in illegal firearm markets emerged as a key finding.

Aside from the informal feature, there are also other characteristics that are unique to illegal firearm markets. Koper and Reuter (1996) contrasted the illegal firearm market from illegal drug markets and argued that if law-enforcement or policy makers plan to constrain the market with the aim of increasing prices and making illegal guns less attractive to consumers, they must adjust for the following particularities. First, transactions in the illegal firearm market are relatively infrequent because guns are more durable and more expensive than illegal drugs. Second, while many consumers may acquire firearms for pleasure, the main motive for acquiring firearms illegally is personal protection. The third feature concerns the informal relational context in that buyers and sellers are often friends, relatives, or trusting contacts and sharing firearms within these dense networks is common. This creates important challenges for law-enforcement efforts because participants in these transactions are generally unwilling to reveal their sources or key buyers. Fourth, and because of a gun's durability and the tight relational settings that generally embed illegal firearm transactions, the life (or career) of an illegal firearm is substantially longer than that of any drug. Fifth, firearms are bulky commodities and are generally kept in small numbers, thus making a law-enforcement

seizure of a sizeable inventory a rare and sensational event. The final feature that distinguishes firearms is the overlap that this market has with drug and other illegal markets. The need for a firearm amongst most illegal market participants highlights a gun's transcending quality.

Koper and Reuter's distinctions have been observed in empirical-based research. In a study of a Chicago community (Grand Boulevard/Washington Park), Cook, Ludwig, Venkatesh, and Braga (2006) found the underground gun market in this area to be "thin". The authors argued that extensive police interventions in the market and strict regulations had much to account for this, but the durability of guns and the possibility to share guns also had much in explaining the market's size and structure. Market distinctions, however, may appear across geographical settings. In what is arguably the most extensive research to focus on illegal firearms in a Canadian setting, Erickson and Butters (2006) compared gun acquisition, carrying, and use patterns amongst youths (904 students, 218 dropouts, and 278 detainees) in Montreal and Toronto. In both cities, students rarely reported acquiring or carrying firearms. Dropouts and detainees in the sample were more likely to have guns, particularly in Toronto. In both cities, about 30% of dropouts reported acquiring their firearms from friends or relatives and, to a lesser extent from drug dealers or street sources (20%). For detainees, important differences were found between cities—in Toronto, the most frequent sources were friends and relatives (40%), while members of the detainee segment of the sample in Montreal were slightly more likely to turn to drug dealers (28%) than friends and relatives (26%). Detainees in the Montreal sample were also more likely to acquire a gun legally (10%) than those in the Toronto sample (3%).

While the Erickson and Butters research informs us of some of the key patterns that are relevant for situating illegal firearm transactions in Canada, there are still many areas that remain to be addressed to arrive at a more complete assessment of what it takes to get a gun through illegal channels in a country that has strict gun controls, a decreasing

crime rate, and relatively low violent trends. At this point, we know little about who are the consumers in this market, what are their gun preferences, how they acquire their firearms, what are their motivations for doing so, how they use such guns, and how such knowledge may translate into more effective policy and law-enforcement interventions.

### **Who Acquires Illegal Firearms?**

As the previous section revealed, past surveys have been restricted to either adult or youth samples. The few studies that did include youths and adults were restricted to a young adult sample. There has also been nonsurvey research that has relied on samples of seized firearms or on sources of illegal guns. Across this multitude of samples, we are able to assemble a solid inventory of the demand side of the illegal firearm market across diverse settings. What past research tells us is that whether amongst youths or adults, women or men, and incarcerated or free offenders, the factors accounting for who acquires firearms through illegal channels remains an ongoing inquiry and not much may be stated with any clear level of certainty.

Some may assume that surveys based on a sample of incarcerated offenders would have a strong proportion of respondents reporting experiences using illegal firearms, but this is not necessarily an accurate assessment. In Wright and Rossi's (1986) adult inmate sample, three-quarters personally owned or possessed any kind of gun. A considerably majority in this group declared that they never registered their guns with police or authorities and never applied for a permit to buy or carry. Within this same sample, 50% were found to be either 'handgun predators', 'one-time firearm users', 'sporadic gun users', or 'shotgun predators', but 39% were categorized as 'unarmed offenders' and another 7% were grouped as 'knife offenders'. The remaining 4% were grouped in an 'improviser' category. Respondents classed as handgun and shotgun predators were by far the most active offenders in the sample.

Similar results were found in Decker and Pennell's (1995) study of over 4141 adult and juvenile male and female arrestees across eleven American cities (Atlanta, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, Phoenix, St. Louis, San Diego, and Washington D.C.). Using data gathered through the Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program, they found that only 39 % of the adult sample reported ever owning a gun and 15 % reported carrying a gun all or most of the time. For juveniles, the proportion of gun owners was lower at 22 percent. Amongst those who did acquire and own firearms, 45 % reported that they obtained firearms through the illegal market. These results were consistent in an extension of the same survey that was based on a larger sample of 7000 arrestees in the same cities (Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell 1997).

Decker et al. (1995 and 1997) argue that arrestees are more prevalent gun owners and users than the average citizen. This statement is also supported from research on youths. Smith (1996) compared gun possession patterns between youth offenders in juvenile facilities and students in ten high schools across the US. All participants were under 21 years of age. Findings indicated that 83% of the youth offenders reported possessing a gun (and 65 % possessed three or more guns), while 22% of the student sample possessed a gun (with 15% possessing three or more). Greater details on owners and buyers in illegal firearm markets are offered in Wintemute, Romero, Wright, and Grassel's (2004) study of the life cycle of crime guns possessed by young adults (24 years of age and younger). The authors examined how quickly guns changed hands in the illegal market. The study draws on gun-trace data for 2121 guns recovered in California in 1999. The guns were traced back to 1717 owners who were younger than 25 years of age (58.6% were not of legal age). Only 14% possessed more than one gun, with multiple gun owners being most prevalent among the oldest portion of the sample (aged 21-24). The authors also made a distinction between individuals who possessed guns and those who purchased guns. Purchasers were usually over 25 years of age, but rarely (only 2.6%) purchased more than one gun. Finally, 69% of the crimes linked to the firearms in

the sample were firearm related (e.g., carrying, firing, or possession) and only 10% were linked to illegal drug offences.

There are other characteristics that represent individuals who are more likely to be firearm consumers and participants in the illegal firearm market. Most of these features reflect the peer and family settings that embed such individuals. Wright and Rossi (1986), for example, found that the illegal acquisition and use of firearms increased if friends carried firearms, but men who were brought up by fathers owning guns were generally more likely to possess one later in their lives. Characteristics gathered on respondents' fathers revealed that 70% owned a rifle or a shotgun when the inmate was growing up and 57% owned a handgun. Half of the inmates were taught how to shoot by their fathers, who were essentially law-abiding hunters and shooters initiating their children. Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, and Howard (2000) found that youths whose peers were carrying guns were much more likely to carry guns themselves. Proximity or membership in a street gang and involvement in illegal drug dealing are also consistent factors influencing illegal firearm possession amongst youths (Lizotte et al. 2000; Decker et al. 1995, 1997). Melde, Esbensen, and Taylor (2009) pushed this fact further and examined the 'fear and victimization hypothesis' in relation to gun carrying patterns. The hypothesis maintains that individuals who fear being victimized are more likely to carry a firearm to decrease such risks. The Melde et al. study gathered self-report data to evaluate students in grades 6 to 9 who were involved in a victimization prevention program across various US schools. While the sample was made up of relatively young respondents (the majority were females) and only 10% reported carrying a gun, the authors did find that involvement in delinquency, gang membership, and the prevalence of gun carrying in a youth's peer group increased the probability of carrying a gun. Whether such findings reveal a self-protection incentive or a straightforward mimicking pattern would require further evidence and analysis. However and as a later discussion on the motivations to acquire illegal firearms will reveal self-protection is amongst the more important incentives for firearm possession.

Gang proximity also emerged as a key factor in one of the rare studies that examined illegal firearm market patterns beyond the United States. Bennett and Holloway (2004) collected data from the New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) program. Surveys were administered to arrestees held in police custody. Overall, 25% of the sample reported ever owning or getting hold of a firearm and 10% reported doing so over the past year. At the bivariate level, males and younger arrestees were more likely to possess firearms and a strong correlation was found between gang membership and gun possession. The highest prevalence of gun possession was reported by offenders who had committed robbery. However, at the multivariate level, only the respondent's gender proved to be a significant factor of firearm possession. This point is important to consider in that Bennett and Holloway's research is one of the rare cases in which such factors are tested at a multivariate level.

#### **Which Firearms are More Likely to be Acquired Illegally?**

According to Kleck's (1997) review of research, handguns are the dominant type of firearms used in crime. There is also a preference for semi-automatic models. This is confirmed by survey data and gun seizure records. For example, in a sample of guns seized by the Los Angeles Police Department over a three-month period during 1989, 50% of handguns were semi-automatic pistols. Similar trends appear beyond the US. In Bennett and Holloway's (2004) study in England and Wales, 60% of arrestees possessed handguns, 30% possessed rifles, and 25% possessed airguns. The authors also observed that offenders did not tend to possess various types of guns, but did tend to possess more than one gun (the mean was 1.4 guns per person).

Kleck also argued that offenders have preferences that resemble the noncriminal population of gun consumers in the US. Wright and Rossi's (1986) survey data provide some support for Kleck's claim. Respondents in the inmate sample reported that they preferred "serious" handguns that were accurate, untraceable, well made and of high firepower and calibre (larger than a .32 calibre). However, research on youths and young

adults suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Wintemute, Romero, Wright, and Grassel (2004) also found that handguns were the firearms of choice amongst young adults, making up 74.6% of guns recovered, but half of these handguns were of medium calibre (e.g. .45 calibre). Furthermore, younger offenders appeared to possess smaller calibre handguns (e.g. .25 calibre).

Ruddell and Mays (2003) also provide details on the types of firearms that youth offenders are likely to possess. Their aim was to assess popular beliefs and media representations that youth were increasingly acquiring more lethal and sophisticated firearms. Their analysis of 1055 firearms that were confiscated by the St. Louis police from 1992-1999 suggests that this is not the case. As in most samples, three-quarters of the sample was made up of handguns (revolvers and semiautomatic pistols) and the most commonly seized gun was the Saturday Night Special, which refers to a wide array of inexpensive, small-calibre (.25 calibre), and low quality handguns. An additional 12.3 % of the firearms recovered were BB guns and pellet guns (non-powder firearms). Sawed-off rifles and shotguns represented between 6.7% and 12 % of the sample between 1992 and 1999. Handguns with a higher-threat\_level represented only 5.8% to 12.3% of annual recoveries and only six assault weapons were recovered during the whole period. As with the Wright and Rossi survey, high-threat weapons referred to medium/large calibre firearms that were well made and reliable.

Variations in firearm preferences between youth and adult samples are likely indications of the range of availability and the development of particular tastes that emerge amongst more experienced consumers. Kleck's claim that the criminal population and illegal market likely resemble their noncriminal counterparts does appear to be a valid statement. As with any commodity, novices are likely to begin with lower-quality products that are in greater supply—a Saturday Night Special is, after all, the symbol for the mass consumption of crime guns. As illegal firearm consumers gain experience, frequent other firearm consumers, and broaden their pool of sources, their tastes change

and they become increasingly attracted to the benefits of more sophisticated and higher quality firearms. Unfortunately, there is no study that tracks this learning curve process.

### **How are Illegal Firearms Acquired?**

Who is able to acquire illegal firearms and what they ultimately acquire is largely dependent on the access that such individuals have to various sources within the illegal market. As mentioned earlier, these sources are more likely to be in close relational proximity to acquirers. In addition, whereas many would imagine the illegal firearm acquisition process to take place in an instrumental or purposive search, the event is often the result of unforeseen or serendipitous circumstances. In Morselli's (2002) previous research with inmates incarcerated in Quebec penitentiaries, opportunistic acquisitions were slightly more prevalent than planned acquisitions (54% vs. 46%). These opportunistic events were even more prevalent when taking place with sources described as family members or friends. The circumstances in which individuals acquire their firearms are influenced by the social networks that embed them and it should not be surprising that people with family members, friends, and acquaintances who are involved in the illegal firearm market as consumers or suppliers are in greater proximity to the situational aspects that trigger opportunistic acquisition events.

Such opportunistic sequences appear to be prominent across much research, as the prevalence of intimate relations amongst firearm sources suggest. In Wright and Rossi's sample (1986), 40% of respondents acquired their most recent handgun from a friend, 14% 'off the street', 11% from a gun shop, 6% from a pawnshop, 5% from a fence, 4% from family members, and 4% from a drug dealer. Overall, this would amount to 44% friend or family, 26% black or grey market sources, and 21% retail outlets. The importance of close contacts was consistent when examining rifles and shotguns, in which 55% were acquired from family members or friends, 31% from retail outlet, and 12% gray or black market sources. Even when guns were acquired through thefts, 31% were stolen from a family member and only 29% from a stranger.

These results are confirmed in research following Wright and Rossi's survey. Kleck (1997) reported results on firearm sources gathered in a 1991 Survey of State Prisons and found that 31% were obtained from family member or friend, 28% from a drug dealer, a fence or another black market sources, 27% from legal retail outlets, and 9% through thefts. Even in Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell's (1997) survey of arrestees in eleven American cities, 55% of the sample said guns were easy to acquire illegally; 37% said that it took them less than a week and 20% stated that it took them less than a day to do so. Thefts were a more important source of firearm access, particularly amongst younger sample members.

This is also consistent with Smith's (1996) survey of high-school students and juvenile offenders. Findings on the sources of their firearms indicate thefts were more common amongst juvenile offenders (24%) than students (9%). As with most research, students were more likely to acquire a firearm from friends or family members (35% for juvenile offenders and 44% for students), followed by street sources and drug-retailing sources, who were much more common in the youth offender sample (29 % versus 16 % for street sources; 25 % versus 9 % for drug-retailing sources). Only a small proportion of respondents reported acquiring their firearms from retail outlets (youth offenders: 7 % for handguns and 10% for rifles; students: 12 % for handguns and 12 % for rifles). Variations are also found across gun types. Opportunistic events, which occur in spur-of-the-moment situations and are essentially unplanned, rarely involve more powerful and sophisticated handguns or long-guns. Searches, which refer to acquisitions that result from purposive or planned actions, are rarely organized for conventional hunting guns or small-calibre and inexpensive handguns.

That firearms may be obtained through opportunistic or well-planned sequences was most thoroughly examined by Webster, Freed, Frattaroli, and Wilson (2002), in their qualitative research with 45 randomly selected youths aged 14-18 years old in a residential justice facility in Maryland. Findings from this study orient us extensively on

the learning patterns and adaptations that consumers experience in the illegal market. The study was designed so that respondents could describe their first and last firearm acquisitions. Of the 45 youths interviewed, only 29 had owned a gun prior to their current incarceration and 21 had owned multiple guns. On average, respondents owned about three guns prior to incarceration. Variations were telling between first and last acquisitions. For first acquisitions, 48% of respondents reported that the search for a gun was passive in that, although some had contemplated the idea of buying one, they were not actually searching for a gun at the time of the acquisition. Only 31 % stated that they actively searched for their first gun. Sources for these first guns were usually acquaintances, family members, or friends—no respondent reported acquiring a first firearm from a stranger. The majority of respondents also stated that they paid less than \$100 (and some even as low as \$20) for a used, small-calibre handgun. Things changed when respondents described their last acquisitions. They described themselves as being more selective than the first time either because they did not want the gun to be linked to a crime or thought that newer, bigger guns were less likely to jam. They acquired new, medium-calibre or large-calibre handguns and, as a result, a larger proportion of subjects paid more than \$200 for their most recent firearms. Sources for these firearms were, once again, primarily friends and acquaintances, although a larger segment of the sample reported buying the most recent gun through street sources, such as drug addicts (n=5 or 26 %).

Whereas past research is generally consistent in findings related to firearm sources, some studies have made additional efforts to examine the influence of key point sources within the illegal market. Wachtel (1998), for example, summarizes his findings from a study of firearms recovered in Los Angeles during the 1990s as follows: "*Our findings portray a considerably different model of gun redistribution than the literature had led us to expect. Instead of a market predominantly comprising of petty criminals selling stolen guns, we encountered a setting rich with licensed and unlicensed*

*entrepreneurs who bought guns directly from licensed sources in order to satisfy their customers' craving for new, large-calibre pistols" (p.234).*

Thus, while firearms are commonly acquired through various opportunistic and purposive sequences within the confines of an individual's close set of personal contacts, some research has demonstrated the importance of key gun suppliers in some areas. Indeed, researchers have also demonstrated that the loss of a central illegal firearm seller will disrupt the firearm market in a given area. Webster, Vernick, and Bulzacchelli (2006) examined how the voluntary decision of a legitimate Milwaukee gun dealer to stop selling Saturday Night Specials in May 1999 changed retail practices and the availability of guns for crime. Using firearm trace data, a time-series design, and comparisons with other cities (St. Louis, Cleveland, and Cincinnati), the authors found a significant impact on the illegal firearm market in Milwaukee. Previous to the gun owner's pivotal decision, this gun store had been linked to a high proportion of firearms recovered from offenders. After the intervention, the two-month mean of Saturday Night Specials sold by the store had dropped to 0.8 (from 14.4 prior to his decision) and the two-month mean for all guns sold by this store dropped to 10.2 (compared to 17.9 prior to his decision). As for the effects on the illegal market per se, the two-month mean for new Saturday Night Specials seized by police dropped from 18.9 to 6.4. The drop for all new crime guns was also telling, with a decrease from 33.5 to 19.1. Such decreases were not observed in the other cities. Even at the multivariate level, results were consistent with a striking decrease of 96% of Saturday Night Specials and 42% of all guns sold by the dealer leading to a reduction of 71% of new Saturday Night Specials recovered post-intervention and of 44% of all new crime guns. What this study suggests is that, in some areas, the illegal market may be organized around one or two central dealers who are either involved in the exclusive sale of illegal guns or who are legally registered and involved in extensive off-the-record sales. The latter was more prominent in Webster et al's Milwaukee study. Such central dealers would have an important impact on the scope, structure, and content of the illegal firearm market, particularly for consumers who do not

have friends and family members who could provide them with a firearm when necessary.

Such personal decisions on the part of gun dealers would appear to be even more effective than law-enforcement interventions within the illegal firearm market. In another study, Webster, Bulzacchelli, Zeoli, and Vernick (2006) examined changes in retail practices following a series of undercover police stings and lawsuits. The effects of such interventions on the flow of guns to offenders were measured across three cities (Chicago, Detroit, and Gary). Stings in Chicago were conducted between August and November 1998 and targeted 12 gun dealers. In Detroit, 15 stings involving 12 gun dealers were conducted in March and April of 1999. Finally, in Gary, stings were conducted in June and July of 1999. The results were mixed and much less significant than the impact revealed in retail practices in the Milwaukee study. Only in Chicago did the authors observe an abrupt and statistically significant 46% drop of new crime guns recovered during a 38-month follow-up period. Such results support Cook, Ludwig, Venkatesh, and Braga's (2006) findings that the illegal firearm market in Chicago is thin, fragile, and in want of multiple sources, making illegal firearms almost twice as expensive as legal firearms. In such contexts, argue the authors, there are important search costs in the market. In the Chicago setting, this allowed professional gun thieves to emerge and led to the development of a local system of brokers who specialized in finding guns for individuals. Search costs also encourage subjects to 'rent' guns from friends, family or associates instead of buying them or acquiring them some other way.

A similar scenario was suggested in Braga, Cook, Kennedy, and Moore's (2002) assessment of the illegal firearm market. The authors focus on the (direct or indirect) role played by Federal Firearm Licensees (FFL) as a source in the illegal market in the US. The authors argue that the: *"the distribution of trafficker size may look like the distribution of FFL size. The great majority of FFLs, even those that are active, sell only a handful of guns each year. However, most of the yearly sales originate from a handful*

*of large FFLs. Similarly, the illicit market may consist of a large number of small, transitory opportunists and a few large operators, with the latter accounting for the bulk of the sales"* (p.336). This conclusion is also supported by an earlier study in which Braga and Kennedy (2001) examined cases compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Data analyzed in this research was based on guns recovered during 648 investigations conducted from 1996-1998. Overall, 50.9% of the firearms recovered during these criminal investigations were acquired with the help of a straw purchaser (someone who buys for a prohibited acquirer); an important proportion of the firearms recovered were also stolen from retail outlets (20.7%) and residences (13.6%); and only 6% came from licensed dealers. Of the 571 straw purchases that were identified in this sample, 47% were stated to be friends with the acquirers, 29% were business partners, 22% were relatives, 18% were spouses, and 7.5% were associates in a gang.

Whether as direct suppliers or intermediary straw purchasers, the importance of personal network sources for acquiring illegal firearms is emphasized across most research and requires further examination in the Canadian context. A greater understanding of such patterns of acquisition in the illegal gun market could provide the basis for determining suitable strategies to be pursued for law enforcement. More than in conventional markets, social networks are crucial in illegal markets because they fill the voids left by the lack of conventional sellers and suppliers. To know how people acquire firearms illegally, we must search for 'who they know' for such purposes and scrutinize how their networks are structured to optimize such a search. This research will meet this end by keeping a central focus on the personal networks of respondents and this will allow us to situate illegal firearm acquisitions in a wider sphere of contacts. With an additional focus on the possible intermediaries that orient searchers of illegal firearms, such an approach will also illustrate the scope and array of indirect channels to diverse sources. Indeed, most researchers studying illegal firearm markets suggest that the networks of those acquiring guns through such channels should be studied further. Many

have explored and come across the importance of such channels; few have studied them with a systematic focus.

### **Why are Firearms Acquired Illegally?**

Most researchers agree that the main motive for acquiring firearms illegally is self-protection. In Wright and Rossi's (1986) sample, 58% of respondents stated that protection was the main incentive for acquiring their most recent handgun, while 28% stated that committing their crimes was their main motivation (28%). For long-guns, hunting was the main motivation. Morselli (2002) also found protection to be an important motivation amongst the inmates that he interviewed. However, his interviews revealed that offenders acquired firearms to protect themselves not only from other offenders, but from law-enforcement agents and potentially armed victims. In Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell's (1997) survey of arrestees, two-thirds stated that protection and self-defence were their main motivations; 22% stated that they sometimes acquired firearms for target practice—committing a crime was not a common motive. Even amongst youths, protection emerges as the principal incentive to acquire firearms. In Smith's (1996) study, both the offender and student segments of his sample stated that self-protection was the main reason to possess a gun (74 % versus 70 %).

Melde, Esbensen, and Taylor (2009) took on the protection motive directly by exploring the "fear and victimization hypothesis" and its influence on gun carrying. Their findings, however, were counterintuitive in that an inverse relationship was found between fear of crime and gun carrying (greater fear, less gun carrying). Fear did increase amongst the older participants in the study, but those who carried firearms reported the lowest levels of fear. While the authors did state that fear was not a driving force (p. 370), they also nuanced their findings by pointing out that the risk of victimization was strongly associated with gun carrying, but not so much for offenders without victimization experiences. Bennett and Holloway's (2004) would appear to add to this experience issue in that motivations for acquiring firearms in their English and Welsh

sample were less centred on self-protection. Only one third of the offenders in this sample stated that they acquired firearms for protection; one-fifth acquired a firearm to commit a crime and a quarter cited other reasons such as intimidation, fun, to sell it, or to pass it on to someone else.

Committing a crime was not the most important motivation for acquiring a firearm, but at least one research program scrutinized this matter a little further. Decker and Pennell (1995) found that 24% of arrestees who ever owned a gun stated that they used it in a crime. This segment of their sample was comprised mostly of juvenile males and a third of that group fired it during the crime. In their follow-up study, Decker, Pennell and Caldwell (1997) also found that 23% used a gun to commit a crime. This proportion was higher in 3 subsamples: 33 % of juveniles, 50% of drug sellers, and 42% of gang members used a gun to commit a crime. From the other end of the barrel, respondents also reported to what extent they had been threatened or victimized by others who were brandishing firearms. Overall, 59% of the sample had been threatened with a gun, two out of five had been shot at, and 16% suffered a gun injury. The most important result regarding motivations and use of firearms was that Decker et al.'s sample members found that gun possession and use was not only tolerated among arrestees, it was the norm, with 28% of their sample stating that gun possession leads to respect among peers. This final result may derive from the perceived need for protection. However, subjects were not inclined to use a gun without good reason—only 9% agreed to the statement that it is alright to shoot someone who disrespected you, while 28% agreed that it was alright to shoot someone who hurt you.

### **Policy, Practices, and Extensions**

There is ample research on practices and policies to control (or not control) firearms across diverse countries, and particularly in the United States. Most focus on firearm use and few are concerned with the acquisition process itself. One study, however, does investigate gun offenders' personal viewpoints and is worth reviewing

here. Unnithan, Pogrebin, Stretesky and Venor (2008) conducted 73 interviews (8% were female) with incarcerated gun offenders and asked them their opinions in regard to Colorado's shall-issue-concealed-carry law that was adopted in 2003 and which made it easier for citizens to be issued a gun carrying permit. Only 40 respondents responded to questions related to the law. All but three of the respondents had knowledge about the new law—35% supported the policy while 55% were against it (the others were undecided). Those in favour of the law thought that it would deter crime as the probability of potential victims carrying concealed firearms would increase. Some respondents also favoured the law because they perceived it as a chance to be issued a permit for themselves (primarily for protection)—they never understood that, as gun offenders, they were no longer eligible. Offenders against the law argued that it would not have a deterrent effect and that violent crime would increase. One of the main rationalizations for this was that offenders would be more likely to use a firearm during a crime to avoid getting shot themselves. In general, they felt that increasing access to firearms would increase their use.

Another policy concern that emerges from the firearm acquisition literature and that may be further developed for the present research concerns how specific interventions should be designed depending on the scope and shape of the illegal firearm market. Differential access to illegal firearm markets suggests different methods for containing that market. Intervening in a market that is low in competition and organized around a few central participants—or “point sources” in Cook and Braga's (2001) terms—is more likely conducted through the strategic targeting of those central actors, while intervening in a competitive market that offers many channels uniting supply and demand is best conducted by random checks (Watts 2003). If individual experiences in illegal firearm acquisitions are centered around the same suppliers, we are looking at the former scenario. If individual experiences are dispersed across various suppliers for opportunistic reasons, we are looking at the latter scenario.

The research review allowed us to gather a substantial amount of facts and insights that will guide the present research objectives. There are several objectives, however, that cannot be addressed within the scope and focus of past research and it is the general aim of this research that such voids be filled during the interview sessions with illicit firearm consumers in Quebec.

Hence, we may have a strong inventory of characteristics that describe consumers in the illegal firearm market, but we still require further details on how past experiences improve an individual's acumen within such a context. We may also know a number of reasons and ways that people acquire firearms illegally, but we do not know why illegal firearms are preferred over legal guns (for those who are not prohibited from acquiring legal guns, of course) and we still require more research on the specific network channels that are at the disposition of individuals as they search or fall upon opportunities to acquire guns. We also need more information on how prices are regulated and on the predominant methods and determinants of exchange, such as cash, commodities, barter, and social obligation. In regard to motivations to acquire firearms, past research has consistently emphasized offenders' needs to protect themselves. This feature must be scrutinized further to assess to what extent those individuals who are acquiring firearms for self-protection are also the ones who are instilling fear by intimidating others with guns. In regard to firearms themselves, past research is limited on how a gun's history may affect its likelihood of being acquired. The latter studies reviewed in the policy and practices section demonstrate that it is possible to ask offenders to express themselves in regard to firearm controls. This has yet to be done in the Canadian context. Indications on how illegal gun acquirers react to gun registration and other interventions concerning the firearm market would clearly inform us on the possible implications of such policies that cannot be attained through conventional consumers.

## **Interview Sample Description**

Twenty men were interviewed in regard to their past experiences acquiring firearms illegally in Quebec. Thirteen of these men were incarcerated in federal penitentiaries in the Montreal region. The remainder of the sample is comprised of seven men who were not incarcerated. This latter segment of the sample presented a unique opportunity to gather information on illegal firearms by individuals who would not be considered offenders—at least not in any official classification.

The overall analysis will address the features of the 20 illegal firearm acquirers, the 72 transactional contexts, and the 80 firearms they acquired. All but one of the interviews was conducted in French. Thus, for the most part, the excerpts that are presented across the remainder of this study are translations.

Interviews were conducted between April and June 2010. On average, respondents were 36 years of age—the youngest was 21 and the oldest was 53. Seven of the respondents had a post-secondary education (CEGEP or university). Eight respondents stated that they had received a high-school diploma. The remaining five had not completed high-school. Inmates who were interviewed for this study had begun their current incarcerations between 2001 and 2009. They had been incarcerated with sentences that ranged from three years to life for crimes as severe as double homicide, armed robbery, and gangsterism to less serious offences such as drug possession. All interviewees were recruited on a volunteer basis. For incarcerated respondents, initial contacts were made with case managers in federal penitentiaries in Quebec who referred us to some of the inmates on their respective caseloads who they felt would be relevant for the study. Meetings were subsequently organized by these case managers so that the interviewer could present the research to the inmate in more detail. If the inmate was still interested in taking part, the interview would take place right away. Aside from the thirteen men who did participate in the study, six others were also solicited but refused to take part. The recruitment of free respondents was made possible by the help of a close

contact of one of the interviewers who was well acquainted with firearm collectors. He set up the meetings and eventual interviews with the seven other respondents who participated in this study. No refusals were recorded while soliciting interviewees for the free segment of the sample.

The seven respondents who had never been incarcerated reveal an important feature that must be retained throughout this study. While they were all active acquirers of illegal firearms, none had a criminal record, only three reported occasional drug (cannabis) consumption, and two reported that they had been involved in thefts during a brief period in their pasts. A key point that is emphasized by this small group of respondents is that illegal firearm acquirers are generally not recognized offenders and this also emerges when examining the experiences of the incarcerated segment of the sample, all of whom had never been incarcerated or arrested at the time of most of their illegal firearm acquisitions. Hence, this is not a study of offenders and their experiences in the illegal firearm market; this is a study of people who acquired illegal firearms, some of whom became offenders. The decision to conduct the study primarily in a penitentiary setting was more to facilitate the fieldwork than to focus the study within the scope of the most active population of consumers. At this point, it is difficult to determine to what extent the demand for illegal firearms is made up of individuals who have no criminal record and who are, essentially, 'honest' working citizens. It is clear, however, that the consumer base for this illegal market is made up of much more than criminals who are seeking firearms for their crimes. Even amongst those respondents who did have criminal records (the incarcerated group), their implication in crime varied considerably. Only five respondents reported having links with organized crime or gang members. The other eight incarcerated respondents were either involved in armed robberies or had no criminal experiences before the crimes that led to their current incarceration—note, that for this latter set of 'first-time offenders', the crimes in question were linked directly to their possession of a firearm.

Thus, the sample may be divided into three separate groups which describe the distinct social worlds that are intertwined with the illegal firearm market. One group is comprised of the seven free (nonincarcerated) respondents who were active firearm consumers and who occasionally sought guns through illegal channels to satisfy their passions and add to their respective collections. The second group is comprised of eight incarcerated respondents who had no serious commitment to crime and for whom illegal guns were not an important part of their daily lives. The third group is comprised of five incarcerated respondents who were more active and organized in crime. By 'organized', we mean individuals for whom crime was an active and profitable way of life and not necessarily a member of a criminal organization per se. For this latter group, possessing a firearm was a recognized part of their lives in that such a weapon was generally present in their everyday routines and interactions.

At first, it was decided that any acquisition that took place before 2000 would be omitted from the study. The incentive to restrict the sample to individuals who had been incarcerated after 2000 was to keep the outlook on illegal firearm experiences as contemporary as possible and limited to a reasonable number that could be controlled within a one-to-two hour interview session. This plan was changed after the first three interviews because respondents were not reporting many acquisitions and it became increasingly evident that, in order to have a clear assessment of the process that an individual goes through when becoming an illegal firearm consumer, it was necessary to have information on all firearms acquired during a lifetime (and not a restricted period).

For most of the respondents, recalling the details surrounding their past illegal firearm transactions was not a difficult task. The more passionate gun acquirers were well versed in gun matters and were very happy to share their vast knowledge during the interviews. For others, who were less active firearm consumers, some details, such as the make or calibre of the gun, were unknown. Information regarding prices or contacts used to obtain guns was always recalled by all sample members. For some respondents, who

had access to firearms on a regular basis, it was impossible to recall and reconstruct each of the acquisition processes. As Respondent 17 (R17), a former biker, explained: *"You know, I'd like to share everything with you, but I don't see how I could tell you about all the transactions for all the firearms that I had during those years. I'll never be able to do that."* With this case, the interview focused on those firearm acquisitions that he did recall. This methodological problem proved to be a minor obstacle in that the six acquisitions that he did recall were provided with great detail and, as he explained, were representative of the manner in which most of his acquisitions unfolded.

Aside from respondent recall issues, there are other limits that must be considered when assessing the results that will be presented throughout the subsequent sections. First, the sample is small and based on a convenient sample of inmates and free respondents who volunteered to participate. In as much as the experiences shared by these respondents are rich and reveal a world that has been minimally probed, particularly in the Canadian context, few generalizations may be drawn for illegal market experiences as a whole. To resolve this caveat, a more extensive survey of a random sample of the inmate population and a more elaborate snowball sample of free acquirers would be necessary. Second, an inmate sample is not representative of the wider criminal population and it is still difficult to establish what exactly an inmate population represents. Past research has created a minor debate around whether inmates represent successful or failed offenders. Little evidence has been provided to settle either side of this issue. Wright and Rossi (1986) maintained that their sample was more likely representative of hard-core or serious offenders. After interviewing free robbers in St Louis, Wright and Decker (1997) argued that 'by definition inmates are failed criminals' (p.7). It would be difficult to choose a side in this debate. What is important to clarify at this point is that the present inquiry may have relied on incarcerated offenders, but because we gathered information for the years preceding their incarceration periods at the time of the interview, the focus is also on the criminal experiences of these inmates when they were free and active offenders. Furthermore, a recent assessment of an inmate

sample is made up of low-level and high-level offenders, thus suggesting that whereas it is not clear whether an inmate sample represents the wider pool of offenders at large, prisons and penitentiaries are indeed filled with all types of offenders (Morselli and Tremblay 2010).

### **Background Experiences with Firearms**

For most respondents, tracing illegal firearm acquisitions beyond the ten-year period (before 2000) was necessary because their first exposure to firearms took place in a family context when they were young adolescents (usually around 13 or 14 years of age). Such first experiences generally involved a hunting expedition with their father or uncle, during which they were offered their first attempts at target shooting. This was particularly the case for respondents who were raised in rural areas, but some of the urban residents also shared similar stories. Most of the respondents (85%) were from urban areas, particularly around the Montreal region. For those urban respondents who did not have their first experiences with firearms within a hunting context, the typical scenario occurred when one or more friends were in possession of a firearm. Respondents described these first experiences as mere play sessions in which they would take turns shooting a gun (usually a cheap handgun or used rifle) with their friends.

Four of the respondents could be described as late starters in that their first experiences with firearms were closely linked to their first acquisitions—before such events, they had no interest in guns and were not in proximity with anyone who could expose them to guns. For some, like R4, exposure to firearms took place much later in life: *“My parents were hippies, pacifists. They were anti-gun. The first time that I saw a gun was at my uncle’s place in Florida. He was a pot-smoking hippie. He would go camping quite often on his own and would bring a gun to protect himself. Aside from that, I never knew anyone who had guns before I was offered my first one.”*

For others, initial exposure to a firearm was linked directly to the onset of their criminal career. R6's experience reflects such a scenario: *"I was 13 when I saw my first firearm. This was before I was sent to the juvenile centre. I was living with some friends and they had many guns because they were robbing banks, jewelry stores, and anything that they could hit. I used to watch them as they prepared for their robberies. They were a lot older than me—about 24 or 25. (...) So, that's the way things started. I would watch them as they loaded their sawed-off shotgun. They also had an AK47. When I used to see all this, I felt like a kid with a whole new set of toys."*

Another important trigger for firearm exposure was reported by four other respondents, who had his first experiences upon entering the army. R11, for example, had no passion for firearms until he joined the army at 19 years old. During this period, he learned that firearms could be *"fun"*. After he left the army, he became increasingly active on internet chat sites with other firearm enthusiasts. He also became a member at a shooting range. R8 joined the army to feed his desire to carry a gun on a daily basis. During this experience, he was trained for combat and became knowledgeable about various handguns, sniper rifles, and machine guns. It was during this period that R8 discovered how good a shooter he was. When he decided not to renew his contract with the army, his only regret was that he would no longer be able to use some of the guns he used as a soldier. Over time, however, he learned about new channels on how to access such guns. R19 also shared a similar background experience: *"At a very young age, I joined the army reserve. I was in a sniper class. So, you see, I was 15 years old and I already had real contact with real guns. I was part of the reserve for about 2-3 years. Every weekend, I would go for military training and shooting practice. I just loved shooting. We were using rifles—FNs. That's what the army used before the C7s."*

Army experiences also led to first transaction experiences. R12, for example, described how he and some friends would sometimes sell firearms and explosives to criminal groups while they were in the army: *"Nothing big: we're talking about 5 or 6*

*items at a time, maybe two or three times.*” It was during this period that he developed the idea that he could acquire any sort of firearms he wanted if he knew the right people. Since he left the army, he has continued to be a regular consumer on the illegal firearm market, but only for his personal use.

Army experiences are not the only occupational contexts in which individuals become increasingly attracted to the lure of guns. R14 never joined the army, but described a similar background experience as the previous respondents. After he dropped out of college at age 20, he went to a friend of the family who was a legal gun dealer and asked for a job. He did not have much knowledge about guns at that point, but his new employer quickly transmitted his passion and gave him the proper training. During this period, he was allowed to handle a variety of firearms and gathered knowledge on the various models and calibres out there. It was at this point that R14 became a firearm collector and he continues to be actively involved with other “*firearm lovers*” that he encountered through internet chat groups, shooting ranges, and his gun supplier mentor with whom he has remained in contact.

These background differences are also crucial for understanding how acquirers become embedded in a specific social context that will likely influence the access and networks that emerge for obtaining firearms illegally. Those respondents who developed a passion for firearms during military experiences did maintain that such a context exposed them to others who shared a similar passion and with whom links were sustained upon leaving the army. Those with background experiences from rural areas also revealed similar extensions to their contact base and their general access to firearms. R1, for example, was quick to point that it did not take much to find firearms in the area where he resided. This area, the Saguenay/Lac-St-Jean region, is more rural than areas surrounding Montreal and Quebec City and gun possession and use is much more common. Such a culture will definitely facilitate access to firearms for those who are

interested. This would be especially the case for any acquirer who would settle for off-the-record acquisitions of rifles or shotguns.

### **Point Sources**

The respondents provided a multitude of scenes in which they acquired their illegal firearms. Law-enforcement and policy makers have generally focused their attention on identifying the key point sources that serve as convergence settings for anyone who wants a gun. In the Montreal area, the most notorious of these illegal market dealers have been suspected of operating off Native reserves, such as Kahnawake, Kanasatake, and Akwesasne, located in proximity to the city. While such supply routes were discussed throughout the interviews, there remains some ambiguity regarding access to these suppliers, the quality of their guns, and their importance as sources within the illegal market.

Curiously, the respondents who had the most experiences acquiring firearms from suppliers on Native reserves were those who had never been incarcerated. Each described the initial challenge of becoming a client. R12, for example, became a familiar face on the reserves by purchasing contraband cigarettes from the same group of people who were also supplying guns. Purchasing an illegal gun, of course, was his main objective. When asked why he decided to go to a nearby reserve when he wanted a gun, he replied that he simply followed public perception on such matters and went looking for a gun in what appeared to be the most obvious place to go. It did not take much time for R12 to realize that acquiring a firearm through such sources was not a simple task. His experience suggests that Native reserves cannot be central sources because they make it too difficult for consumers to acquire their products.

R14 had a similar experience with Native reserves. For his first attempt to find a gun supplier on the reserve, he simply went and started asking people if they knew anyone who sold guns. He knew that this was not the best strategy, but he was hoping

that his knowledge about guns would help and that someone would not refuse, or worse, sell him a cheap gun for a ridiculous price. He said that his first trip on the reserve was a disaster. He was looking for a Smith and Wesson .357 magnum. Nobody even looked at him and one person almost kicked him out for even mentioning firearms. But he did not give up. A week later, he went back to buy some cigarettes and alcohol at the same reserve. He was hoping that the various suppliers of contraband goods would become more familiar with him and see that he was serious. It worked, but it took another seven months of weekly visits. At one point, a man took him aside to his truck and showed him a revolver that was hidden under a bag. It was not the model that he was looking for and the asking price was \$550, which he considered too expensive. He made a counter-offer at \$100 less and the transaction was made. R14 explained that he was ready to pay for a gun that he did not really want as long as it made him a contact.

For those respondents who were linked to criminal groups or had biker affiliations, the experience was radically different. R17 said that he bought many of his guns from Kanasatake dealers: *"This was the easiest way to go. These guys had boxes of guns. Most were brand new. All you had to do was tell them what you wanted and they would find it for you. But this wasn't always true—at least four times, I had asked for a special order and I didn't get anything. I'd say that they would come through one out of four times. They would talk a lot, but they didn't always deliver."* As R17 clarified, his initial contact with these suppliers was through his biker links: *"Someone from the organization—a biker—brought me there the first time. I don't remember why we were there, but we weren't there for guns. Anyway, he (his eventual gun supplier) showed up during the meeting and they all started talking about guns. I just stayed in contact with him after that."* R17's experiences suggests that the difficulties that many acquirers experience at first when dealing on the Native reserves are facilitated by the long-standing contacts of mutual acquaintances and particularly if such mutual acquaintances are heavy firearm users as would be the case with R17's biker contact.

R17's nuance that reservation suppliers were not always the most reliable was pushed even further by R20, another biker, who provided the most negative experiences in regard to these sources: *"Their guns are like their cigarettes—they're cheap. When I want a gun, I don't want something cheap. I want a good quality gun. You probably get told a lot during your interviews that all these guns are coming out of Akwesasne, right? Many people probably talk about this, but I could tell you that it shows when a gun comes from there. They don't even have any real brands. They only have cheap clones—just like their cigarettes that taste terrible. If I'm looking for a Smith and Wesson, I'm not going to be happy with some bastard brand. Seriously, the stuff they sell is crap."*

Aside from suppliers from these Native reserves, respondents also described a number of acquisitions that took place with registered firearm dealers. However, unlike the Native reserve suppliers, legal gun dealers are not concentrated in a limited geographical space. Illegal firearm acquisitions with registered gun dealers, quite differently, are closer to other suppliers that emerge in informal channels of acquisition. As the subsequent sections will illustrate, it is much more important to recognize the multitude of overlaps that the illegal firearm market maintains with the legal firearm market (through registered suppliers who occasionally deal illegally) and with countless other aspects of individuals' daily lives. The ambiguity marking this latter qualification is intended because, in many experiences, the gun acquirer was not even looking for a gun to begin with.

### **Searches and Opportunities**

Past research has contributed significantly toward nuancing the variety of scenes in which illegal firearms are acquired. Whereas most of the respondents grew up or resided in urban settings, a slight majority of firearm acquisitions (64%) took place in rural areas. The most general distinction concerns how an acquisition process is triggered. Two categories were identified during the interviews: 1) searches that are generated by the needs of the acquirer and 2) spontaneous acquisitions that are based on

unplanned sequences or opportunities. While popular opinion of gun transactions may convey an image of an individual searching for a gun, more than half (55%) of the acquisitions reported during the interviews were the result of unplanned offers.

Respondents described several sequences that were triggered by others in their lives. R4 received a tip from one of his contacts who informed him that he knew someone who was looking to sell his gun: *"It was an opportunity. One of the (cannabis) pushers who worked for me told me that he had a client who had a gun for sale. I paid him a visit at his place. That's when I found out that the client was also a pot pusher. I trusted him after that—he came from the same community as me, you know."* R6's experience represents the many situations in which a gun supplier triggers the acquisition process by passing the message that he has firearms for sale: *"I was 18 years old and I bought a 9mm from him. I was at a bar and I met these guys that I knew. We came from the same neighbourhood. They were involved in guns, dope, and other things like that. They knew me mainly by reputation and told me that if I was looking for a gun, all I had to do was call them. We set up a meeting a couple of days later. They sold me the 9mm. I didn't have any money and I needed the gun to make some money so that I could buy some more drugs and pay the gun. I told them that I would pay them a little more if they gave me the gun and waited for the payment. They agreed, I did a couple of hold-ups, and paid them back."*

Being embedded in a criminal environment clearly helped increase one's chances of finding such opportunities. R7 confirmed this: *"When you're part of the milieu, you receive offers like this once or twice a week."* This was also confirmed by the overall patterns that emerged during the interviews. The incarcerated respondents were more likely to report opportunistic acquisitions. This was especially the case for those respondents who reported affiliations with crime groups and gangs—all but one acquired their guns through spontaneous events. For the rare incarcerated respondent (R15) who reported a search, his difficulty of getting by in the milieu was also made evident: *"I*

*asked around, but I couldn't find one or I had no money to buy one. It lasted 2 years. It wasn't easy to find a gun. You can't just go up to just anyone and say: 'Hey, can you sell me a gun?' You have to find it with people you've known for a long time. And even these people may be suspicious. They might be upset if you ask them for a gun and they may end up asking you what you know about me and why you come to them for a gun. They would want to know who told you to go see them."*

Such difficulties were not typical of most searchers. R5, for example, described that he was looking for a gun to protect himself: *"I had a few friends who told me that they knew someone who sold guns. This guy sold everything: guns, drugs, counterfeit bills—anything illegal. I knew him a little because we were in the same school together. So I went to see him and I picked up my first gun"*. For those, such as R18, who had solid connections through their criminal activities, finding a gun when needed was simply a matter of asking a close contact: *"How did I get this gun? I asked my cousin if he had any. I was making a lot of money and I told him that I needed something to protect me. My business was expanding and the money was getting a little out of control. My cousin went to one of his biker friends and he came back with a gun for me about a week later."*

Free respondents, who were primarily firearm collectors and very selective in the types of weapons they acquired, were also more likely to acquire their firearms with little difficulty after planned searches. The most important obstacles were the rarity of the gun itself and the time it took to find such a commodity. R11, for example, described how his quest of finding a Royal Blue Python .357 magnum finally came to an end. R11 had never thought about buying an illegal firearm, but when the word started spreading on one of the internet chat groups that an individual was looking to sell such a firearm, he started to ask around to see if friends and contacts knew the supplier and could vouch for him. Such acquisition processes are facilitated by the presence of such intermediaries who may vouch for trust between the opposing parties in the transaction. At one point, a close friend of R11 told him that he had met the supplier at past gun shows and that he

could arrange a meeting. A cryptic email created for the chat rooms was sent to this supplier. In less than a day, R11 received an email from the supplier, who had suggested that they meet at a shooting range. This meeting took place between R11, the intermediary, and the gun supplier. R11 examined the gun, but decided not to shoot it since it would oblige him to become a member at this shooting range, which meant that his name would be registered in their system. A second meeting was set up at the supplier's house in Laval and R11 took more time to examine the handgun. He finally purchased the firearm. The intermediary did not receive any payment for his help in the transaction, but he was promised that he could try the gun at some point.

Several of the intermediaries described during the various transactions did receive some form of financial compensation or finder's fee for their help, but, as the previous example illustrated, this was not always the case. R1 describes one transaction that was organized by an intermediary: *"We (he and his supplier) were going to pay him something for putting us together, but after he put us in contact, we decided to do the transaction without him and save some money."* In other cases, intermediaries were consistently compensated, particularly amongst the free respondents in the sample. R8 described how such transactions work. In his case, R8 had a childhood friend who had guaranteed him access to his next firearm of choice in exchange for a finder's fee. A finder's fee of \$100 was established. Other finder's fees discussed throughout the interviews varied with the value of the gun(s) and difficulty of finding such a gun. In some cases, the finder's fee could increase to \$400 or \$500 for firearms worth more than \$1000.

While it was reflected throughout the accounts offered by several respondents, only one respondent was explicit in his past attempts to expand his network beyond the intermediary who was responsible for getting him most of his firearms. R14's experience points to an important feature of illegal firearm acquisitions: acquirers are generally assessing new ways to improve their access. For R14, one of the gun collectors amongst

the free respondents, it was a matter of by-passing his intermediary: *“I didn’t have any problems with him. He always organized my transactions. I just knew that he wouldn’t be there forever and if I wanted to keep on getting what I wanted, I had to find my own way.”*

### **Description of Contacts**

How an acquisition process unfolds is primarily a function of the number and type of contacts that are available. The twenty respondents provided information on 93 contacts (for an average of 4-5 contacts per respondent). The number of contacts per respondent ranged from 1 (for those who were involved in only one transaction) to 10. A considerably majority (62%) of these contacts were suppliers. The remainder were described as intermediaries or brokers in various transactions (26%), co-acquirers (5%), or buyers of their illegal guns (7%). This latter contact group is clearly under-represented in this study because the focus of the interviews was specifically on firearm acquirers and not suppliers. Those buyers who did find their way into the sample of contacts were individuals to whom respondents sold or exchanged their firearms at some point. Analyses for the present study will concentrate particularly on suppliers and intermediaries. The focus is fitting since only five respondents reported having no intermediaries in their illegal firearm acquisitions experiences—and three of these respondents without intermediaries (R2, R13, and R16) only reported one transaction.

All but six of the contacts reported in the sample were men. In general, women played very marginal roles in the transaction sequences. Three were former girlfriends who had placed them in contact with suppliers during unplanned transactions and who were not described as being key or useful contacts for illegal firearm access. There was one girlfriend, however, who was a more instrumental intermediary in that she negotiated the purchase of a single shot Ruger Rifle (calibre .243) between R9 and a gun dealer on a Native reserve. Another women who emerged as a key contact during the interviews was a cleaning lady and part-time cannabis dealer who worked near R4’s apartment and who

sold him her husband's 9mm semi-automatic FEG to help pay for her husband's legal expenses—her husband was incarcerated about a year before. R14 also shared a similar experience. He bought a CZ 75 9mm pistol from a woman whose husband had recently died. She was eager to get rid of the gun and make some money. They shared a mutual contact who served as an intermediary in the transaction. Such intermediaries were distinct from suppliers in that they simply placed the acquirer and supplier in contact.

On average, contacts were older than the acquirers. This was due to suppliers who were generally older than the respondents at the time of their acquisitions. Intermediaries were typically part of their circle of friends and close contacts and, thus, more proximate in age. Assessing the relational ties between respondents and contacts confirms this finding. Whereas 75% of intermediaries were contacts who were first encountered in non-criminal contexts, only 46% of suppliers were first encountered under similar circumstances. The majority (54%) of suppliers were people who respondents first met in a context that was linked to crime (compared to only 25% for intermediaries). Intermediaries were also described as closer contacts than suppliers. Respondents had lengthier relationships with their intermediaries (5 years on average) than with suppliers (an average 2.5 years). When asked to weigh the strength of the relationships that they had with their contacts (stranger, distant, not that close, close, and especially close), intermediaries proved to have the strongest links with respondents. More than 60% of intermediaries were described as either especially close or close contacts. Suppliers were scattered more evenly across the lower relational categories (strangers, distant, and not close) and only 30% were classed amongst the closest of contacts. Indeed, suppliers were contacts who were generally not frequented by the respondents for other reasons than acquiring a firearm. Furthermore, only 30% were described as friends and only 7% were people with whom the respondents shared occupational or professional links (none were family members). Intermediaries, in contrast, were much more present in the respondents' lives—54% were described as friends, 17% were work or professional contacts, and 13% were family members. When asked to assess the number of times they

spoke with their contacts, respondents reported never speaking to 56% of their suppliers—only 25% of suppliers were spoken to every day or a few times a week. Intermediaries, once again, were more present in the lives of respondents with 54% spoken to on a daily or weekly basis.

This description of the ensemble of contacts reported throughout the interviews suggests that the market for illegal firearms weighs heavily on mutual contacts who serve as pathways for guns in both spontaneous and purposive transaction contexts. These small personal networks are indeed telling of what we should expect for the overall market. While this research only allows us to explore such issues, it is possible at this point to determine what type of systematic measures may be developed to assess whether the illegal firearm market is indeed brokerage-based and to what extent it is closed or open.

#### **What Do the Networks Tell Us About the Illegal Firearm Market?**

To assess the structure of the personal networks that were revealed during the interviews, three models are proposed (see Figure 1). Figure 1a represents the closed market scenario in which acquirers are limited to a small number of illegal gun suppliers and venues. Thus, in such a context, even acquirers with a relatively high number of intermediaries are limited because the transaction process depends on a few suppliers who dominate the market. Such a scenario is best exemplified in settings in which key point sources are prominent and informal channels toward illegal firearms are minimal. Spontaneous or opportunistic acquisitions are rare in such a setting and firearms generally require purposive searches that require considerable know-how and time. While popular images of firearms purchased off Native reserves and other black market convergence settings may appear to confirm such a scenario, past research on illegal guns has generally provided findings that stray considerably from this image.

**Figure 1: Network Scenarios for Illegal Firearm Acquisitions**

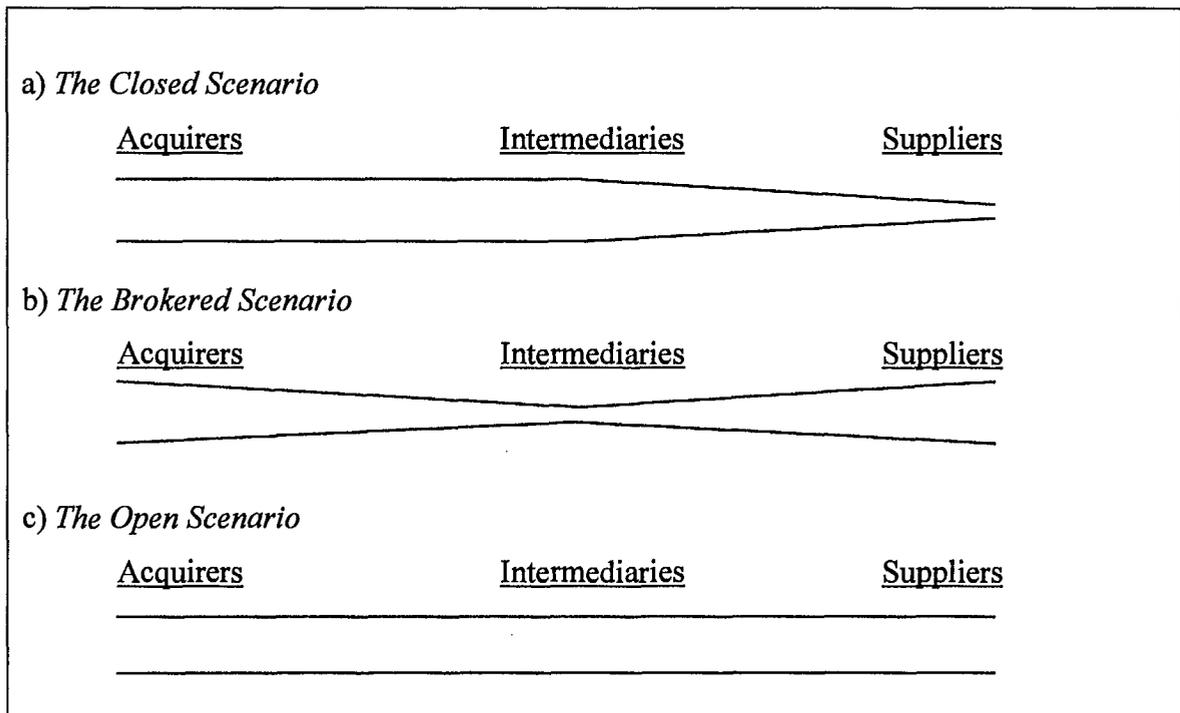


Figure 1b represents the brokerage model in which a bottleneck structure shapes the market for illegal firearms. In such a context, there are multiple suppliers, but access toward them is somewhat difficult and typically requires a mutual contact that vouches for trust between acquirers and suppliers. It is therefore the number of available intermediaries or brokers that defines individual access and overall circulation. In such a model, intermediaries are less available than the suppliers themselves, thus creating a certain constraint in a market that would be open if all acquirers had straight access to suppliers.

Figure 1c is the open market model. In such a setting, access toward illegal firearms is fluid and the number of suppliers and intermediaries per acquirer is relatively similar. Such a scenario is indicative of a market that is largely driven by informal channels of access (family, friends, and acquaintances are typical sources) and a high volume of opportunistic and unplanned events.

Based on the findings from the previous sections, we already know that most guns were acquired in episodes that were triggered by serendipitous offers that required little effort. In addition, some respondents were in contact with reliable gun suppliers and only a few turned to the point sources that would be more prominent if the market was centralized. In most cases, there was a variety of suppliers who served as sources for illegal guns. Many respondents, however, did not have straightforward relationships with suppliers who could provide guns when called for. For those who did not have access to reliable suppliers, their networks included one or more intermediaries who could bridge and manage transactions when needed. These findings suggest that the market for illegal firearm markets is not closed. However, depending on the number of intermediaries that an acquirer could turn to during the acquisition process, the market is likely to be built around brokerage channels or direct and open relationships with suppliers.

Table 1 provides the summary data for the transactions and networks that were reported by respondents. This information was used to establish the network scenario that best fit each respondent's illegal firearm acquisition experiences. For each respondent, the number of transactions was weighed against the presence and number of intermediaries and the number of suppliers.<sup>1</sup> For example, R1 operated in an open network because his three transactions took place with three different suppliers and, on two occasions, were mediated by two different people. There is no centralizing point in R1's personal network and his access to intermediaries and suppliers for firearms was fluid and versatile. R6's and R7's experiences were even more open with straightforward access to a variety of suppliers reported for the ensemble of their transactions—R6 had a perfect transaction/supplier ratio of 4:4 and R7 had a ratio of 6:5, meaning that six of his acquisitions were conducted with five different suppliers. In all, eight of the twenty respondents were classified as having such open networks.

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<sup>1</sup> The four respondents who only reported one transaction were excluded from this analysis.

**Table 1: Description of Acquisitions and Networks Reported by Respondents**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>No. Acquisitions</b>	<b>No. Acquisitions with Intermediaries</b>	<b>No. Intermediaries</b>	<b>No. Suppliers</b>	<b>Model</b>
1	3	2	2	3	Open
2	1	0	0	1	--
3	2	1	1	1	Brokered
4	2	1	1	2	Brokered
5	1	1	1	1	--
6	4	0	0	4	Open
7	6	0	0	5	Open
8	6	3	1	1	Closed
9	4	2	2	4	Brokered
10	2	1	1	3	Open
11	2	2	2	2	Open
12	11	3	3	7	Brokered
13	1	0	0	1	--
14	5	4	1	5	Brokered
15	4	1	1	4	Open
16	1	0	0	1	--
17	6	3	3	6	Brokered
18	3	2	2	3	Open
19	2	2	2	2	Open
20	6	1	1	3	Closed

Brokered scenarios emerged in six cases. The most fitting example was R14, who had a high transaction/supplier ratio (5:5) that was centralized around one intermediary (four of the five acquisitions were mediated by the same contact). Recall that R14 was the respondent who also attempted to establish contacts with other suppliers so as to limit his dependency on this intermediary. Other brokered networks were less evident, but were classified as such because a considerable proportion of the transactions passed through a small number of intermediaries.

Only two respondents were classified as operating in closed networks. For R8, the lack of versatility was evident with six transactions concentrated around one supplier. This was the case whether R8 was acquiring with or without an intermediary. R20's

experiences were not as obvious as R8's, but half of his six transactions were limited to the same suppliers.

The network scenario classification is also consistent with the structural features that were computed for each matrix gathered during the interviews. Constructing these matrices was the final step of the interview process. As respondents described their past acquisitions, they also kept track of the contacts that were revealed during these accounts. Once all acquisitions were described and the set of contacts was finalized, the respondent was asked to establish the relational strength between all members of his network. Figure 2a provides an illustration of R17's matrix. Figure 2b illustrates the sociogram for this matrix.

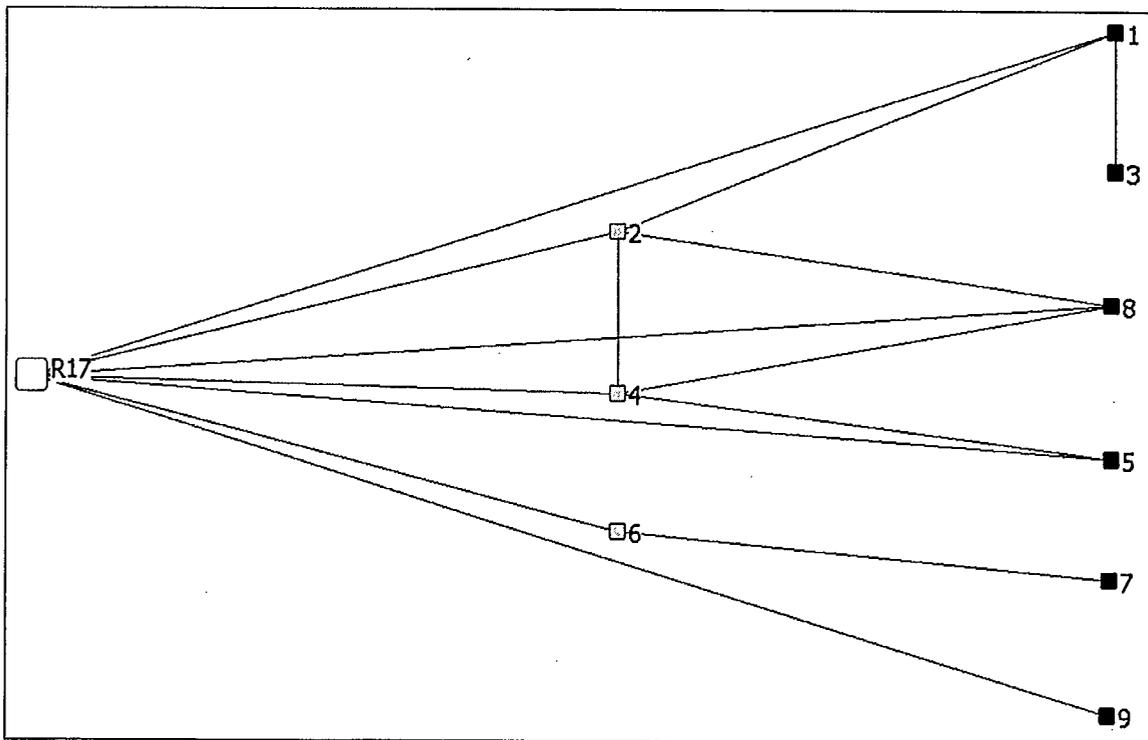
R17 reported nine contacts who were involved during six illegal firearm acquisitions. C2, C4, and C6 were intermediaries in three of his transactions. C1, C3, C5, C7, C8, and C9 were gun suppliers. R17 was directly linked to all but two of the contacts in his network—he had no direct relationships with two suppliers (C3 and C7). While no contact had a substantial presence in this network, most were directly linked to at least one other contact—excluding contacts with R17 himself, C3, C5, C6, and C7 all had one contact; C1, C2, and C8 had two contacts; and C4 had three contacts. The only contact who was linked exclusively to R17 was C9.

**Figure 2a: R17's Network Matrix**

	R17	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9
R17	-									
C1 (S)	1	-								
C2 (I)	1	1	-							
C3 (S)	0	1	0	-						
C4 (I)	1	0	1	0	-					
C5 (S)	1	0	0	0	1	-				
C6 (I)	1	0	0	0	0	0	-			
C7 (S)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	-		
C8 (S)	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	-	
C9 (S)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-

S = Supplier; I = Intermediary

**Figure 2b: R17's Illegal Firearm Acquisition Network**



What R17's network reveals is a well-brokered network which extends to a multitude of channels to illegal firearm suppliers. R17 was positioned in a network that gave him the option of operating through his reliable intermediaries or dealing directly with a supplier. His network contained both the element of trust, which reduces risks in illegal settings, and autonomy, which allows a participant to be less dependent on any single intermediary or supplier. Indeed, an important feature to examine is the level of nonredundancy that emerges between contacts. The simplest way to assess this is to examine the number of 0s in the matrix. A contact is completely nonredundant when s/he is not linked to any other contacts. The emphasis on nonredundancy within the network extends from structural hole theory (Burt 1992). Burt's theory tells us that having quicker access to information benefits in a competitive arena enables some players to fill positions that allow them to seize the more rewarding opportunities available. Such a competitive edge extends from a player's capacity to enrich a personal network with a

proportionally higher set of entrepreneurial opportunities or structural holes. These structural holes are represented by the level of nonredundancy (or the 0s) in the network. Redundant contacts are those that lead to the same people and information benefits. The more a player is linked with redundant contacts, the more his network is limited in opportunities available for attaining a given objective (e.g., acquiring a gun). Such a closed network is generally represented by a clique, in which all members in the network are in direct contact with all other contacts (thus, no 0s). To be increasingly nonredundant, a player must work at filling his personal network with the most structural holes possible. These structural holes are opportunities to link disconnected others and, thus, broaden one's own scope of opportunities. Such open networks are represented by star or brokerage configurations.

The structural hole framework offers two measures that account for such network features. The two measures, efficiency and constraints, have been applied in past research on criminal networks and have proven to be key factors explaining offender performance, such as criminal earnings and promotions in organizational settings (Morselli and Tremblay 2004; Morselli 2005; Morselli, Tremblay, and McCarthy 2006). Consistent with the opportunity-driven outlook, network efficiency (or greater nonredundancy) has been found to increase performance in crime. Network constraints (or greater redundancy), inversely, has been found to decrease an offender's scope of opportunities and, thus, his overall performance.

Within the scope of this study, each network measure is used as an indication of how closed, brokered, or open an individual's set of opportunities are for acquiring illegal firearms. High constraints are a sign of closed networks that are either highly dependent on one or few contacts or simply limited in the number of options that an individual possesses for either purposive or serendipitous acquisitions. Relatively low constraints indicate an open setting in which access to illegal firearms is versatile and opportunities are many. Such an open market setting is also captured by high efficiency. In R17's case

(Figure 2), efficiency was measured at 80% and constraints were measured at 27%, suggesting a personal network that was versatile and high in opportunities. For R17, the loss of one or two suppliers would not have hampered his ability to obtain an illegal firearm. N17, however, was not the most effective gun acquirer in the sample. N7 was more efficient, with a perfect star network (100%) and the least constraint in the sample. At the other extreme, R3 was dependent on one supplier and, thus, completely constrained (100%) and not all efficient (0%). R8 was also limited in his opportunities, with only 25% efficiency and 65% constraints.

Table 2 presents the average for each network measure across the groups of closed, brokered, and open illegal firearm acquisition scenarios. The analysis is consistent with the expected overlap between the network classification that was derived from the number of intermediaries and suppliers across all transactions in an individual's experience (Table 1) and the network efficiency and constraints measures that were calculated from the matrices that were constructed during the interviews. The most efficient and least constrained firearm acquirers were those who reported open networks. The least efficient and most constrained firearm acquirers were those who reported closed networks. Brokered networks were situated between the closed and open network scenarios.

**Table 2: Model Types by Network Features**

<b>Network Scenario</b>	<b>Average No. Acquisitions</b>	<b>Average Efficiency</b>	<b>Average Constraints</b>
Closed	6	29%	70%
Brokered	5	47%	53%
Open	3.3	70%	48%

While the network scenarios that were qualified above allow us to assess a firearm acquisition network through a simple count of intermediaries and suppliers, they do not result in a precise measure that may be used systematically across a wide population and at aggregate levels. Network efficiency and constraints do permit such

systematic and aggregate measures, but they require the complex task of recording the network matrices for each individual. That both approaches corroborate each other is, at this point, the most important outcome to consider in that subsequent researchers may simply chose to use a simple framework that permits the qualification of individual networks or a more complex algorithm that permits an assessment of a wide sample of market participants and, ultimately, of the market itself. The network measures also allow us to assess which types of acquirers are able to access illegal firearms in different ways. For example, respondents who reported organized crime links had, on average, more efficient (71% vs. 45%) and less constrained (36% vs. 63%) networks than others in the interview sample.

Using these network measures to account for acquisition patterns within the illegal firearm market is an improvement over the traditional focus on point sources in a given jurisdiction. Not only do the network measures integrate contacts that may centralize the supply of illegal firearms, but, most importantly, they permit the many informal channels of acquisition to be integrated simultaneously. This network approach, in the end, allows us to demonstrate whether an illegal firearm market is centralized around a limited set of suppliers or decentralized around a wide variety of individual level paths towards guns. In the former scenario, network efficiency will be low and network constraints will be high at the aggregate level. The inverse is expected in the latter scenario. Once the level of centralization is established, it is only at this point that any attention should be given to identifying key point sources—if any are identified, of course.

### **Why Were Illegal Firearms Acquired?**

Past research has demonstrated that the acquisition of firearms is driven primarily by an incentive to protect oneself. The respondents in this study confirm this past finding to some extent. For most of the firearms (53%), respondents simplified their replies by stating that they wanted the gun for no particular reason—that they simply wanted to

possess it. Protection, however, was amongst the main reasons, with 16% of the guns acquired for such a motive. Only in two cases did respondents provide a nuance that such firearms were also used for intimidation purposes, but we could assume that those who used the guns for armed robberies also implied such a motivation. Almost the same proportion of guns (15%) was acquired to commit a crime. The remainder of the firearms were either acquired for their value (for resale) or for someone else.

Motives (or non-motives) for guns vary in accordance with two other variables: 1) whether the acquisition was the result of an unplanned opportunity or planned search and 2) whether the respondents were free, low-level offenders, or more organized offenders. Guns acquired for mere possession, protection, or for someone else were generally the result of a search. Guns acquired for crimes and resale were more likely the result of an opportunity. This latter point is interesting in that it illustrates to what extent the acquisition of a gun for an armed robbery or for quick profit is not necessarily a rational decision that follows a well planned script. While the interview data does not allow us to determine to what extent the acquisition of a gun creates an incentive to commit a crime, it does diminish the accuracy of overly strategic outlooks of crime that portray offenders as calculating individuals who prepare themselves accordingly.

When examining the type of respondent in accordance with his past motivations to acquire firearms illegally, clear distinctions emerged across the three subgroups in the sample. The free respondents were almost exclusively motivated by mere possession (93%). We may assume that underlying this mere possession is a passion for guns that drives an individual to acquire more, better, and rarer guns as his acumen grows and his resource pool is increasingly cultivated. This was the case with three of the free respondents (R8, R9, and R10), who often acquired firearms together and shared their knowledge and contacts with each other. While the transmission of information regarding contacts and channels for acquiring illicit firearms was common across all respondents' experiences, the sharing of guns was not prevalent beyond this small group of

respondents. Aside from R3, who borrowed the firearm he needed to commit robberies from his mother's boyfriend, no other respondent discussed the sharing of guns.

The lower-level offenders in the sample were more likely to acquire a firearm for an eventual crime (35%) or for someone else (12%)—only 24% stated that they needed the gun for protection. Lower-level offenders were also motivated by mere possession (30%), but this was not the case with the more organized offenders in the sample in that none reported such a 'reason'. Instead, the organized offenders reported that they needed to protect themselves (40%) or they wanted to resell the gun for a profit. R4, for example, explained how he came to a decision that it was time to get a gun: *"I was dealing cannabis and I was making some pretty good money. During a transaction, I was robbed \$600. It wasn't really an armed robbery, but it did shake me. That's when I decided that I needed a gun for protection. I always had lots of money around and I didn't feel safe."* Others, such as R15, described a more general context of fear: *"There was tension in the area where I was living. There were more and more fights and people were getting injured. At that time, I had my gun on me all the time. If I couldn't go somewhere with my gun, I just didn't go there."*

Other reasons, particularly for first-time acquirers such as R6's initial experience, included the thrill and emotional energy of having a firearm: *"I was 14 and I had a friend who gave me a .22 that I sawed-off. It was my first gun. It gave me a rush. I made me feel older, more mature. It made me feel like I was in control."* Others, such as R7, did not share such feelings toward guns and perceived their weapons more pragmatically: *"For me, a gun is a tool. I had many friends who would really trip on guns and keep a collection. For me, a carpenter needs his hammer and tools. It's the same for me. A gun is a tool."* R7's outlook toward firearms was also represented by his quick reactions to good deals: *"He sold it to me for very little—for \$150. A .38 revolver at that time was about \$500 and that's what I sold it for soon after."*

## Description of Firearm Inventory

Overall, respondents provided descriptions of 80 illegal firearms that they obtained within the scope of their 72 transactions. Most of the firearms (64%) were handguns of various makes and calibres. Of the 29 long-guns that were reported, eight were submachine guns or assault rifles (i.e., M16, Uzi, AK47). Only two of these long-guns had been altered (sawed-off). Across the three groups in the sample, both the lower-level and organized offenders acquired a greater number of handguns, while the free respondents acquired handguns and long-guns to an equal extent. Variations were also found for more detailed features of the guns.

When it came to revealing their motivations for acquiring particular types of firearms, respondents often described how limited they generally were in regard to the choice of guns available. In most cases, they explained that they would stress whether they wanted a handgun or long-gun. Beyond such specifications, they were largely at the mercy of what was available at that moment in time. Even the best connected respondents in the sample, such as R17, explained that they had to adjust to what was in supply: *"You don't really have a choice. You take what's available. You can't go up to someone and tell them that you want an exact model and everything. That only happens in the movies. In real life, you take what there is. I had preferences, but you take the gun that's there. I had a few 9mm, but I always preferred revolvers. I still took the 9mm."*

Complete information on prices and models/calibres were reported for 36 firearms (see Table 3). Information was also gathered in regard to the conventional list price for a new firearm of the same model and calibre.<sup>2</sup> Such information allows us to assess the variations that individuals pay for a similar product and how such prices compare with conventional purchases. Overall, the illegal acquisitions that were reported during the

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<sup>2</sup> Conventional prices were based on those provided at various firearm websites, such as the *Gun Directory* site ([www.e-gun.net](http://www.e-gun.net)) or the *Guns and Ammo* site ([www.gunsandammo.com](http://www.gunsandammo.com)). While these prices are for 2010, based on the American market, and for new guns, it was important that a common source was used for the present exercise in order to have a systematic indication of the type of deals that are made in the illegal market. For some firearms that were no longer in production, prices on the used market were retrieved from various internet sources.

interview sessions were more expensive than the same products on the legal market. Only 12 firearms were purchased for less than their list price. In most cases, the guns were acquired for more than their legal value, with mark-ups ranging from \$50 to \$1000 more than the gun's conventional value. In several cases, the acquirer was given the gun with no financial cost.

There are several reasons for these higher rates. The first reason has more to do with the rare gun market than the illegal market. Several of the firearms that were acquired illegally were collectible items (e.g., Rock-ola M1, H&R M1 Garand). Another reason was based on the limited personal experience and resources that respondents had for acquiring firearms. A third reason was revealed by a few respondents who maintained that they were ready to pay any price for something that they wanted. In many cases, respondents described that they did not know how much the gun was worth and that they were simply attracted to the feel or look of the weapon. R4, for example, described the simplicity of such decision making: *"I liked the way it looked. I wanted it. So, I bought it. I didn't care about the price."*

**Table 3: Firearm Inventory Gathered During Interviews**

Resp.	Model	Calibre	Price	Listed Price (\$US)*	Price Difference
1	Smith&Wesson	357	\$400	\$700	- 300
8	Smith&Wesson	357	\$750	\$700	50
4	Smith&Wesson	41	\$1000	\$1100	- 100
10	Smith&Wesson	38	\$575	\$625	- 50
15	Smith&Wesson	38	Gift		
20	Smith&Wesson	38	Gift		
11	Smith&Wesson	44	\$1000	\$1000	0
2	Beretta	22	\$300	\$300	0
6	Beretta	9	\$800	\$500	300
12	Beretta	9	\$750	\$500	250
6	Browning	12	Gift		
16	Glock	32	\$1000	\$550	450
16	Taurus	45	\$1000	\$400	600
19	Sig Sauer	9	\$800	\$900	- 100
20	Walther	9	Gift		
13	FN Herstal	9	\$150	\$500	- 350
12	AK47		\$650	\$600	50
7	AK47		\$160	\$600	-440
11	Colt Python	357	\$1200	\$1000	200
12	Winchester	270	\$600	\$800	- 200
14	1894 Marlin		\$650	\$700	- 50
8	M-16	5	\$2500	\$1500	1000
8	Remington	270	\$400	\$800	- 400
9	Remington	270	\$800	\$800	0
12	Remington	270	\$400	\$800	- 400
2	Ruger 77	22	\$600	\$600	0
9	Ruger 77	44	\$600	\$650	- 50
9	Ruger	243	\$900	\$800	100
12	Ruger M77	270	\$600	\$500	100
12	Luger	30	\$1250	\$1200	50
9	Sako 85 Hunter		\$1500	\$1500	0
12	Savage Edge 11	308	\$900	\$350	550
12	Rock-Ola M1		\$1550	\$700	850
12	H&R M1 Garand	30-06	\$1100	\$1000	100
1	Cooy 64	22	\$50	\$200	- 150
1	Herbert Schmidt	22	\$250	\$150	100

\* Canada-US conversion rate during data gathering period (April 2010) was \$1.0158 CAD.

There were also some clear differences between respondents in the prices paid for a gun of the same make and calibre. Such distinctions help us understand why some illegal firearm consumers pay more for guns. For example, both R1 and R8 purchased a Smith and Wesson .357 revolver. R1, however, paid almost half the price for the same firearm model (\$400 vs. \$750). Both R1 and R8 were passionate about guns and had begun their own personal collections. Both also knew various gun suppliers who could provide them with an illegal firearm. The main difference between the two transactions concerns how they were initiated. R1 was offered the gun while R8 purchased the gun after a ten-day search. R1 was also classed as having an open network, while R8 was classed as having a closed network. When compared with the legal market price for a Smith and Wesson .357, we realize that R1 obtained an excellent deal for this gun. Of course, it may be that R1's used revolver was of inferior quality, but this was not the case. When asked about the quality of the gun, R1 clarified that it was in mint condition and that *"it was a good deal at the right time – the guy just wanted to get rid of the gun."*

Opportunistic transactions, however, do not always result in better deals than planned searches. R8, R9, and R12 each purchased a Remington .270 rifle. R9 paid twice as much than what R8 and R12 paid for the gun (\$800 vs. \$400). R12 was quick to clarify that he paid so little for the gun because it was offered to him by one of his contacts for a deal that he knew he could not refuse. R12, quite differently, went through an elaborate search for his rifle, but waited for the best price possible. Because he wanted this gun to simply add to his collection, he was able to wait long enough to find a real bargain. Like R12, R9 was also offered the firearm during an opportunistic event. He simply said that he paid the going rate for that type of gun. When compared with the list price on the legal market, R9 was right.

Other respondents shared other experiences in which several firearms were purchased at the same time, thus making each unit less expensive than if purchased separately. R7 described such a deal. He purchased 18 AK47s for \$3000 from a personal contact in Montreal (roughly \$160 per unit). He kept one and sold the rest for \$7000 to a

gun dealer who operated out of a nearby Native reserve. Note that, at a conventional rate of \$600 per unit, R7 definitely had a good deal, but he also sold the guns for a relatively low price to his (roughly \$400 per unit). R7 was a Hells Angels affiliated biker who was heavily involved in drug trafficking and importation during the peak of the violence that took place in Quebec in the 1990s. When asked to explain why he received such a good deal for so many firearms, he explained that he was used to buying firearms and, because of his line of work, that they were always available. The 'order' within his biker faction was to purchase all firearms that came one's way—*"whether it was a handgun, dynamite, or a rifle, we bought it."* In this particular case, the gun supplier who sold R7 the load of assault rifles was heavily in debt to him and R7 subtracted the \$3000 from the amount that was owed. Clearly, not everyone has similar circumstances to exploit. The only other respondent who reported acquiring this type of gun was R12 (one of the free sample members), who paid slightly more than the going rate.

Not all drug traffickers were as knowledgeable and resourceful as R7 when it came to firearms. R16 provides a sharp contrast. He paid \$1000 for a gun that was listed at \$550. R16 was primarily a cannabis dealer and his experience with cocaine importation was limited to only one operation—*"I really didn't know anything about importing cocaine and that's what I ended up getting caught for."* His experience with firearms was even more minimal and his only acquisition was the result of a chance proposal from one of his former cannabis clients who was in need of money—*"He was a gambler and he needed money, so I bought the gun from him. (...) I bought a Glock 32mm from him. I didn't even know what type of gun it was. The only reason I know now is because my case manager told me why you wanted to interview me. She checked my dossier and told me which gun was seized when I was arrested. That's how I found out what I bought. I knew you were going to ask me and I didn't want to look too stupid. My idea was to buy the gun and sell it for a profit. I was told that I could get \$2000 for it. I really don't know anything about these things. I didn't even bother asking if it was ever used in any crime. When I got arrested, I began to worry because I was scared that the gun was probably*

*used in another crime and that I would be accused of something that I didn't do. I was lucky because nothing happened, but, when you think about it, I put myself at risk of getting a life sentence just to make an extra \$1000."*

As R16's experience reveals, respondents were not overly vigilant regarding the background of the firearms they acquired. Most simply replied that they never bothered asking their suppliers or intermediaries whether the guns they acquired had been used in previous crimes. Even though R16 came to realize the implications of acquiring a crime gun, such possibilities were simply not of primary concern for respondents when acquiring. However, and as the next section will reveal, some respondents were somewhat more attentive to distancing themselves from firearms after they used them in a crime.

### **Use and Destiny of Firearms**

Most of the guns acquired by the sample members were not used for any crime—at least they were not reported as such. This is the case even if we exclude the seven free respondents who did not report any crimes. Amongst the guns that were acquired by the incarcerated respondents in the sample, 40% were reported as not being used in any way. The armed robbers in the sample were the most likely to use their guns during their crimes. While many stated that they acquired firearms to protect themselves, the drug traffickers in the sample rarely carried their guns on a regular basis for protection—only two guns served such a purpose and two others were made visible during altercations with other offenders. Such a finding would appear to clash with a previous discussion regarding the protective feature of firearms amongst drug traffickers. The guns were in proximity for specific events (e.g., transactions, exchanges with competing dealers) and, for the most part, not needed on a daily basis. In this sense, firearms are needed for protection when trafficking drugs, but not necessarily for the general lifestyle in which traffickers find themselves.

In five cases, the acquired firearms led to a homicide. In each episode, the shooter was one of the incarcerated respondents who reported no links with organized crime or drug trafficking. In such cases, the gun was the source of their current offender status and each respondent recognized this fact. R1 stated that *"if the gun wasn't available that night, I would have never killed those two guys."* It was with a .357 magnum that R1 killed two men in a bar. One night, he was having a drink and he got into an altercation with three men who were pushing him around. One of the men threatened to return the next day to give him a beating. R1 had already experienced being bullied around when he was in high school and he learned that the best way to deal with bullies was to beat them before they beat you. That night, he returned to his apartment to get his gun. His intention was to go back to the bar and scare the men off and cease the conflict. When he returned to the bar, he pointed the gun at the man who had threatened to return the next day, but instead of scaring him away, the man got up from his seat and began countering him (calling his bluff). When the man got too close, R1 shot him. He then walked toward the second man, who was still sitting in his chair, and shot him as well. He told me that he did not return to the bar with the intention of killing anyone, but that when the man charged him, he had no choice but to shoot him—he saw this as an act of self-defense because if he would be disarmed, he was likely going to be killed. When I asked him why he approached the second man after shooting the one who charged him, he simply answered: *"Yeah, that's when I went too far and that's why I'm still in prison"*. The third man had left before he returned to the bar with the gun. I asked him what he would have done if he had been there as well. He told me that he would have shot him too.

R2 described his murder of two men along similar lines: *"It's amazing how fast things happen and how simple it is—that would have never happened if I didn't have the gun in my truck that night."* R15 also explained the importance of understanding the situational factors related to gun availability. Mixed with other factors, such as high drug or alcohol consumption, the presence of a firearm increases the level of lethality in an already explosive context—*"I was in a get together—a party. We got a hint that someone*

*was selling drugs in the building. I was drunk and high. We were all drunk and high. It's not an excuse, but I was really gone. I had my gun and I decided to rob this guy with some friends. It went bad and I ended up shooting him."*

Indeed, any conflict is at risk of turning into a dangerous situation when one or more parties are in possession of a gun. R4 described how the events unfolded for the homicide that he was convicted for: *"The only time that I ever used any of my guns was when the murder took place. The guy insisted that I owed him money, but I didn't owe him anything. I felt that I was in danger before going to meet him, but I still went because I wanted to prove that I didn't owe him anything—but I had a bad feeling. I thought that he was going to show up by himself or with one other person, but they were five. I was with three other people, but I didn't want to scare anyone, so they waited in the office for me—just in case something went wrong. At one point, they realized that my friends were in the office and they started fighting with each other. Someone was screaming 'guns! guns! guns!' and when I went to check, one of the guys was holding my friend from the neck. Everyone kept on fighting and then I shot a few times. Two people were dead and others were injured. One of the people killed was my friend. Everything happened so fast and someone pushed him while I was shooting and I hit him by accident"*.

Almost half (46%) of the guns that were acquired by this study's respondents are still in their possession. This is especially the case for the seven free respondents who continue adding firearms to their growing collection. While a good portion of the guns were seized by the police (24%), another 26% were put back into circulation through resales, exchanges for other guns, gifts, or returns to the person who supplied the gun. Not all resales were for profit. R6, for example, described how he became the supplier on the disadvantaged side of an opportunistic acquisition: *"I kept the gun for about six months and then I sold it because it was the weekend and I needed some money for some crack. I couldn't rob a bank because they were all closed. So, I sold the gun. I don't*

*remember who I sold it to and for how much. I remember it was a guy in a crack house. I probably gave it to him for nothing”.*

The remaining 4% of the gun inventory was either thrown away or abandoned. This appeared to be a common method amongst the bikers in the sample. R7: *“During the biker war, we were buying all the guns that came our way. We would get rid of them as easily. For any gun that we used, whether it was an air gun or anything else, the order was: use and destroy. I must have destroyed 150-200 guns. Right after they were used, they would end up in the river. This doesn’t mean that I shot with all these guns. Sometimes, I would just hit someone with the gun. Even if I would shoot against a wall or window, it was always the same: use and destroy.”*

R17 confirms R7’s description of his past experience with guns: *“Whenever there was a shooting spree, when we shoot at a bar, a store, a car, or anything else, we would get rid of all guns that were used. Even if we didn’t shoot anyone—the moment that an object was touched—we had to get rid of the guns.”*

### **Reflections on Gun Control**

Not all respondents had much to say when asked about their opinions on gun control. Some of the incarcerated respondents would simply reply that they were no longer allowed to have guns because of their felon status. Other respondents were more explicit on the ease or difficulty of acquiring illegal firearms. R7 explained that the strict gun controls were the reason why he would destroy every gun that he acquired: *“It’s like I said before, they’re all in the river, especially the ones since 2000. Since 2001, they really tightened up on gun controls. The sentences are the same, but they no longer offer reduce sentences for firearm possession. Now you get a major sentence for having an illegal gun. Rather than getting caught selling a firearm that was already used, I rather not take the risk and just throw it off the Jacques Cartier Bridge.”*

R17 described how acquiring firearms beyond the law was facilitated by his biker connections: *"You know, at first, getting a gun isn't easy. It's a little like getting drugs. It's not like on TV where anytime a guy wants a gun, he gets one. But, I was never really unable to get a gun—at least not after I joined the organization. At first, it was guys in the organization who supplied me. When I became part of the organization, I would ask the guy who was responsible for guns (the sergeant at arms)."* Aside from the organized crime link, the personal experiences shared by the respondents do not allow us to confirm much. R4 felt it was difficult: *"It's not easy to get a gun. It's a world that's pretty closed. But if you're involved in organized crime, it's easier because you're always around loads of guns."* R5, who only reported one transaction, found it easy, but he was not basing his opinion on his own experience: *"It's easy to get a gun on the streets—really easy. I know a lot of guys who found guns without much trouble—used and new guns."* For R6, the ease of acquiring a firearm was linked directly to the simplicity of past opportunities: *"It was always easy for me because I never looked for guns—I always received offers—how much easier can it get?"*

The seven free respondents shared a more precise assessment of gun controls and their experiences acquiring illegal firearms. In many ways, the pathway toward the illegal market is through the legal market in that as one's tastes become more refined and acumen increases, the search is oriented toward rarer and higher quality firearms. Often, these rare firearms are prohibited and the only way to acquire them would be through illegal channels. Such cultivation of one's *savoir-faire* develops through interactions with other firearm owners who share a similar passion and knowledge. In general, it is through such contacts that opportunities for informal and illegal access emerge.

Some of the free respondents, such as R9 and R14, explained that their decision to acquire guns through illegal channels was simply to avoid the bureaucratic constraints of getting a gun legally. R9 said that the idea of buying illegal firearms never crossed his mind before his contact showed him how much quicker and easier it would be to by-pass

official controls. R14 explained that he could not be bothered with the paperwork and the permits that were required to own and carry guns. He never really wanted any “fancy” guns, but he did want to avoid the hassles of having to complete the forms and waiting for permission.

Another interesting twist offered by the free respondents revealed that to remain an active illegal firearm consumer and avoid detection, one had to occasionally declare and register a firearm. Both R9 and R10 stated that a legal purchase from time to time would protect them from police attention. R11, who was the most prudent of all respondents interviewed for this study, made it a point of legally registering a new firearm before he purchased the first two illegal firearms. He also stated that he stores the illegal guns according to official codes.

### **Conclusion**

The interview sessions confirmed several of the general patterns emerging from past research. Informal channels of acquisition were indeed the norm. Multiple channels of acquisition were in place for most of the respondents. Intermediaries were prominent actors in most transactions. Opportunistic transactions were prevalent across all respondents' experiences. Protection was an important motivation for some respondents, particularly amongst the more serious offenders in the sample, but not as prominent as it was in past research. Instead, several respondents explained that they often acquired their firearms because they realized that it was a good deal, because they were passionate collectors and ready to invest in serious guns, or simply because they were attracted to the style, look, and feel of the weapon. Not only were serious offenders regular consumers of firearms. The sample was comprised of younger and older offenders, from rural and urban backgrounds, and who had been incarcerated for a variety of crimes. Furthermore, almost half of the sample was comprised of illegal firearm consumers who had never been incarcerated. They were free and passionate firearm collectors who were ready to acquire through illegal channels if it meant getting a gun that was difficult or impossible to obtain through legal means. While the more organized offenders reported

more consistent access to illegal firearms, most respondents reported having little problems finding a gun. Respondents also shared experiences in which we were able to assess how tastes develop as a consumer becomes increasingly knowledgeable of firearms and how the more serious and well-made firearms gain preference over the abundance of cheaper and common guns that are available.

Aside from confirming these patterns from past research, the interview material also revealed results that have yet to emerge in previous investigations on illegal firearm markets. In terms of access to illegal firearms, while most respondents acquired their firearms through close and trusting contacts, some did share experiences involving point sources, particularly those operating on Native reserves around the Montreal area. While such dealers attract much attention within law-enforcement and media circles, the few respondents who did have past contacts acquiring (or trying to acquire) a firearm from these off-market dealers described how difficult it was to establish initial contacts with them. Some respondents waited months before they were able to solidify a reliable buyer-supplier relationship and those respondents who did access such point sources with considerable ease generally did so through their criminal contacts. It remains that, for the typical illegal firearm consumer, Native reserve dealers are neither common nor easily accessed suppliers. As mentioned above, such central suppliers were not the most prominent type of sources for firearms. This is not simply because of the difficulties to access them, but largely because respondents were already well exposed to a variety of channels to acquire firearms. An analysis of the personal networks revealed during each of the interviews that only a few respondents had closed networks that were limited to one or two suppliers and that most were able to acquire illegal firearms through open or brokered networks that put them into contact with a multitude of suppliers (in open networks) or a reliable set of intermediaries (in brokered networks). This was the case for both free and incarcerated respondents in the sample. That open and brokered networks were more prominent suggests that even if key suppliers are removed from the market by

law-enforcement efforts, consumers will be able to adjust rather quickly by turning to any of the channels that is accessible to them.

An analysis of choice-preferences and prices revealed that consumers are largely dependent on what is available within their network at the time of the transaction. This, however, varied with the level of experience and knowledge that respondents had during their respective acquisitions. More experienced and passionate acquirers were ready to wait lengthy periods and pay hefty prices for the firearm they wanted. This was particularly the case with the free respondents who were avid gun collectors. But for the most part, respondents simply took what was available and paid what they felt was the going price for a particular gun. Some distinctions were revealed, however, in certain opportunistic events in which the respondent found himself with considerable bargaining power over the individual supplying the gun who was either in debt to the respondent or in strong need of drugs. Of course, such privileged situations typically occurred with respondents who were heavily involved in drug trafficking contexts. This was not the case for most respondents, as it is not for most offenders.

A final analysis concentrated on the whereabouts of the firearms that were discussed throughout the interviews. While a quarter of the guns were seized by the police and a small portion (4%) were destroyed or discarded by the respondent himself, another quarter were put back into circulation through resells and almost half of the guns are still in the respondents' possession.

Such results are important to consider when determining policy and law-enforcement practices that are intended to contain the illegal firearm market. What may come as a surprise for most law-enforcement and policy actors, respondents knew very little about the background of the guns they acquired and inquired minimally on whether they had been used in previous crimes. They were, however, careful to distance themselves from those guns that they personally used in crimes. Curious precautionary

measures were also revealed by those respondents who were not incarcerated and not involved in crimes (beyond the illegal firearm transaction, of course). While their participation in the illegal firearm market was based on their decisions to circumvent the legal firearm registration process which was perceived as slow and burdensome and their motivation to add to their collections specific types of guns that were prohibited within the Canadian context, they were also careful to remain active in the legal firearm market by purchasing and registering a new gun so as to demonstrate that they were still following the rules. While we see no way of identifying such acquirers who overlap the legal and illegal firearm markets, the experiences that they revealed do suggest that the illegal market is frequented by much more than the offending population. This, of course, is typical of most black and underground market economies.

### **Recommendations**

#### *1) The need for a more extensive survey of illegal firearm acquisitions*

There are many areas that have been raised and covered in this study that require further probing and the first recommendation that emerges concerns the need for a more extensive survey of incarcerated and free illegal firearm consumers. While the present study succeeded in fleshing out some important experiences and patterns that have been minimally discussed in past research, a firm understanding of the factors and dynamics that shape the illegal firearm market will be better served by an elaborate questionnaire-based survey of a larger and random sample of the inmate population and randomized snowball sample of free illegal firearm market participants. The present study has led to the creation of some useful instruments to measure pricing features and the shape and size of personal networks used for illegal firearm acquisitions. These gauges may be used to estimate greater aggregates than the small sample examined here. Doing so would further solidify our understanding of whether this illegal market is indeed governed primarily by the informal channels of acquisition which have been found to be prominent in almost all research in this area over the past three decades. Obtaining a more extensive

grasp of pricing features and the factors that influence variations across a wider pool of acquirers will also add to this clearer understanding.

*2) The illegal firearm market transcends the population of serious offenders*

There is a popular stereotype of the illegal gun consumer. The image depicts a menacing gang-banger, an organized crime member, or a thrill-seeking armed robber. It is true that such individuals are prevalent in the illegal firearm market, as they were in this study's sample, but illegal firearm markets are comprised of much more than these stereotypical figures.

Focusing on illegal firearm acquirers who were not incarcerated revealed an important segment of this market: the 'law-abiding' illegal firearm acquirer. This segment is indeed worth exploring further and it would be useful to determine how broad this sort of law defiance is among otherwise law abiding persons. The opportunistic and informal nature of illegal firearm acquisitions suggests that this segment may be much more important than commonly believed. Our sample tapped into a group of firearm collectors whose tastes and desires seemingly surpassed that which was available and permitted within legal boundaries. One may expect other firearm consumers, such as hunters and members in shooting ranges, to eventually seek a gun that is bigger, more powerful, and more intimidating at a certain point in their personal experience.

The desire for prohibited guns is not the only feature that increases the number of otherwise law-abiding citizens. In many instances, even common firearms may be transferred within family and friendship circles with no mention made to any official source. Such transfers may be most likely in rural areas where the gun culture is more commonly associated with sport than with crime, where applying for proper registration is made somewhat more difficult because of less convenient access to the necessary information and documents, and where it is much more difficult for law-enforcement officials to control on a consistent basis.

The stereotypical images also fall short within the offending population. What our study revealed was that there were two general sets of offenders who were involved with firearms: offenders who were in proximity to guns on a daily basis and individuals who became offenders only after they acquired a firearm. The former set of offenders were more experienced with guns and were, thus, more interested in the powerful firearms that match the stereotypical images of the semi-automatic armed gang or organized crime member. Because they were more experienced and because they were in contact with others with considerable experience, such offenders also had greater versatility for acquiring firearms through opportunistic or planned sequences. The latter set of offenders were generally less knowledgeable about firearms and were typically involved in one or two illegal transactions which involved small calibre handguns or guns intended for hunting. For these offenders, who were generally incarcerated for homicide, access to these guns during times of intense conflict led to the crimes for which they would be incarcerated for lengthy periods. It remains curious that in as much as research on firearm violence has made such 'specific availability' a key term to account for when drafting gun-control laws, researchers and policy makers who examine the firearm market have not carried this pattern over to their own conceptual frameworks. What is essential here is that, in as much as we believe that illegal firearms are acquired primarily by offenders, it remains that many of these offenders were not offenders before acquiring these illegal firearms. Thus, if we assess the status of the acquirer before and not after the crime that would lead to their incarceration, we would see that the pool of illegal firearm acquirers is composed of much more law abiding citizens than our stereotypes would lead us to believe.

### *3) Watch the internet and the transformation of illegal firearm networks*

One element that was overlooked while preparing the research design for this study was the rise of the internet and how it may have transformed how buyers and sellers in the illegal firearm market interact. At least two respondents (R11 and R14) described how they used internet chat groups and firearm enthusiast sites to not only

learn more about guns, but also search for rare and powerful guns that were prohibited in the Canada. The internet has also been associated with some tragic event that took place over recent years in which web-purchased firearms were used in mass (or potentially mass) shootings. It is difficult at this point to establish how important the internet has become for illegal firearm transactions and further research should probe this matter further, but it is clear that, as in most aspects of daily life, the rise of cyberspace will transform the networks that individuals use to stumble across and search for guns. Access to suppliers multiplies considerably for anyone and, as the experience of R14 illustrates, chat groups and other discussion outlets serve as key intermediaries for those looking for specific weapons.

What the internet brings to this illegal market is the creation of a mass convergence setting in which buyers and sellers come to access a much larger pool of firearms than would have been accessible if market participants would have been restricted to their traditional networks of friends and trusted contacts. The internet increases the level of competition in the market. Probably the closest analogy that could be made in the present study concerns the variety of firearms that were acquired on Native reserves in which suppliers have the privilege to function in a somewhat borderless environment. Carrying the internet factor into the illegal firearm market not only brings a greater variety of guns to any consumer's fingertips, but it also has the potential of rendering the Native reserve supplier obsolete in the near future.

*4) Strategic targeting is futile in a decentralized market, but amnesty may work*

Respondents described experiences in which they had access to a multitude of suppliers and intermediaries to acquire firearms illegally. This suggests that the market is largely decentralized around informal contacts and not centralized around key dealers. Unlike some rare studies on American jurisdictions, there is no central point source that emerges from the Quebec-based experiences that were gathered during this study. Aside from a few experiences that brought acquirers to successfully and unsuccessfully

purchase firearms from suppliers on Native reserves, the bulk of transactions took place with close contacts, often through unforeseen circumstances. Such events are not possible to identify or prevent through targeting strategies that focus on suppliers who are suspected to be key players in the market.

The fact remains that there are no key players in such a market and random checks are more likely to lead to the identification of the typical illegal firearm acquisition. As in most illegal markets, law-enforcement is trapped in a situation in which the illegal market is structured around informal mechanisms of supply and demand that cannot be contained unless random targeting is increased to levels that match transaction rates. Police forces simply do not (and should not) have the resources to control any market to that level. Thus, rather than target with a high level of randomization, law-enforcement officials invest their resources in the occasional big load, in hope that removing guns before they enter the market will reduce the overall pool available to consumers. But guns are not drugs. They last longer and they are easily kept in circulation through informal channels. Police busts of large consignments of firearms will only be effective if the pool of guns already in circulation is considerably reduced. What is required is a continuous check of the flow of guns entering the market and a serious strategy to reduce the stock of guns already in circulation.

One practice that policy makers may want to consider to address this latter issue is monthly province/country wide amnesty days (e.g., the first Sunday of every month) in which illegal firearm owners are allowed to bring their guns to the nearest drop-off location with full anonymity and with no questions asked. Such an approach will clearly not increase the number of arrests in this market, but it will definitely reduce the pool of illegal firearms considerably.

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**YOUR FEEDBACK on**

***Identifying Illegal Firearm Market Acquisition Patterns***

This report was prepared under the Government of Canada's *Investments to Combat the Criminal Use of Firearms* (ICCUF) Initiative. ICCUF supports the national collection, analysis, and sharing of firearms-related intelligence and information to assist law enforcement agencies to counter gun crime and the illicit movement of firearms. The ICCUF reports are intended to enhance knowledge and assist in the development of policy and operational approaches and strategies. We invite comments on this report.

1. How useful did you find the report?

- very useful     useful     somewhat useful     not useful

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- policy development     operational considerations     strategic planning

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- yes     no

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6. Please provide any other comments.

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Thank you!

Send the completed form to:

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