



# Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

November 2001, NCJ 189369

## *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities*

# Firearm Use by Offenders

By Caroline Wolf Harlow, Ph.D.  
BJS Statistician

Approximately 203,300 prisoners serving a sentence in a State or Federal prison in 1997 were armed when they committed the crime for which they were serving time. An estimated 18% of State prison inmates and 15% of Federal inmates reported using, carrying, or possessing a firearm during the crime for which they were sentenced. In 1991, 16% of State inmates and 12% of Federal inmates said they were armed at the time of their offense.

Among all inmates in 1997, 9% of those in State prisons and 2% of those in Federal prisons said they fired a gun while committing their current offense. Of violent offenders, 18% of State inmates and 9% of Federal inmates discharged a firearm. Less than 2% of inmates serving time for a drug, property, or public-order offense fired a gun during the crime that resulted in their prison sentence.

Among prisoners who carried a firearm during the offense for which they were serving time in 1997, 14% had bought or traded for the gun from a store, pawnshop, flea market, or gun show. The 1997 percentage who had acquired their firearm at a retail outlet represented a significant drop from 21% in 1991. The percentage of inmates receiving their gun from family or friends rose from 34% in 1991 to 40% in 1997.

## Highlights

Type of firearm	Percent of prison inmates	
	State	Federal
Total	18.4%	14.8%
Handgun	15.3	12.8
Rifle	1.3	1.3
Shotgun	2.4	2.0

Characteristic of inmates who carried firearms	Percent of prison inmates possessing a firearm	
	State	Federal
Offense		
Violent	30.2%	35.4%
Property	3.1	2.9
Drug	8.1	8.7
Public-order	19.1	27.3

Gender	Percent of State inmates possessing a firearm	
	1997	1991
Male	19.1%	15.5%
Female	7.3	6.2
Age		
24 or younger	29.4%	19.1%
25-34	16.5	15.5
35 or older	14.8	13.6

Criminal history	Percent of State inmates possessing a firearm	
	1997	1991
First-time offender	22.3%	9.5%
Recidivist	17.2	18.4

Source of gun	Percent of State inmates possessing a firearm	
	1997	1991
Total	100.0%	100.0%
Purchased from –		
Retail store	13.9	20.8
Pawnshop	8.3	14.7
Flea market	3.8	4.2
Gun show	1.0	1.3
Friends or family	0.7	0.6
Street/illegal source	39.6	33.8
	39.2	40.8

Use of firearm	Percent of prison inmates possessing a firearm	
	State	Federal
Total	100.0%	100.0%
Fired	49.1	12.8
Killed/injured victim	22.8	5.0
Other	26.3	7.8
Brandished to –	73.2	46.2
Scare someone	48.6	29.3
Defend self	41.1	24.9

- During the offense that brought them to prison, 15% of State inmates and 13% of Federal inmates carried a handgun; about 2% had a military-style semiautomatic gun or machine gun.

- Among inmates in prison for homicide, a sexual assault, robbery, assault or other violent crime, 30% of State offenders and 35% of Federal offenders carried a firearm when committing the crime. Almost a fourth of State inmates and almost a third of Federal inmates serving a sentence for a violent crime had carried a handgun during the offense.

- 29% of State inmates under age 25 at the time of the survey were carrying a gun when they committed their current offense compared to 15% of those 35 or older.

- In 1997 among State inmates possessing a gun, fewer than 2% bought their firearm at a flea market or gun show, about 12% from a retail store or pawnshop, and 80% from family, friends, a street buy, or an illegal source.

- On average, State inmates possessing a firearm received sentences of 18 years, while those without a weapon had an average sentence of 12 years.

- Among prisoners carrying a firearm during their crime, 40% of State inmates and 56% of Federal inmates received a sentence enhancement because of the firearm.

Data for this report are based primarily on personal interviews with large nationally representative samples of State and Federal prison inmates. In the 1997 and 1991 Surveys of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, inmates were questioned about any firearms they may have used when committing a crime and asked to specify the type of weapon, its source, and its use in committing crimes. In addition, inmates were queried about the types of both current and past offenses for which they were sentenced, including any weapons offenses.

**Almost a fifth of prison inmates carried a gun during their crime**

An estimated 18% of State prison inmates and 15% of Federal inmates reported that they used, carried, or possessed a firearm when they committed the crime for which they were serving a sentence to prison (table 1).<sup>1</sup>

When asked if they had ever been armed while committing a crime, about a quarter of State prison inmates and a fifth of Federal inmates reported that they had carried a gun while committing at least one crime.

Almost half of both State and Federal inmates said that they had owned or possessed a firearm at some time in their lives. Equivalent measures for lifetime gun ownership among adults in the general population are difficult to find. Personal or telephone interviews and polls provide estimates for persons in the general population owning a firearm at the time of the survey. An estimated 25% to 29% of the adult population reported currently owning a firearm when surveyed.<sup>2</sup> According to public opinion polls, members of 4 in every 10 U.S. households have access to a gun.

**Less than 2% of inmates reported carrying a fully automatic or military-style semiautomatic firearm**

Fewer than 1 in 50 State and Federal inmates used, carried, or possessed a

military-style semiautomatic gun or a fully automatic gun during their current offense (table 2). These guns, as used in the questions and definitions for the personal interviews with prison inmates, include the following:

- *military-style semiautomatic pistol* — similar to a conventional semiautomatic pistol except that the magazine or clip is visible<sup>3</sup>
- *military-style semiautomatic rifle* — a semiautomatic rifle with military features such as a pistol grip, folding stock, flash suppressor, or bayonet mount
- *military-style semiautomatic shotgun* — a semiautomatic shotgun with military features such as a pistol grip, folding stock, flash suppressor, or bayonet mount
- *machine gun* — a fully automatic gun which, if the trigger is held down, will fire rapidly and continuously.

<sup>3</sup>The survey interview included in the operational definition of a military-style semiautomatic pistol the phrase "can hold more than 19 bullets."

Some examples of these firearms are the UZI, TEC-9, and MAC10 for handguns; the AR-15 and AK-47 for rifles; and the "Street Sweeper" for shotguns. Possession of these models meeting criteria specified in Federal statutes can be unlawful.

To be understood by inmate respondents who were asked about their gun use, the questions and definitions in the survey reflect terminology commonly used by prisoners to describe types of weapons. If questioned by respondents, interviewers read to them the definitions included on pages 14 and 15 of this report. Of necessity, this language is similar in concept but may differ in wording from technical descriptions in Federal statutes pertaining to firearms.

The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 made it unlawful, with certain exceptions, to manufacture, transfer, or possess military-style semiautomatic weapons,

**Table 1. Possession of firearms by State and Federal prison inmates, by type of firearm, 1997**

Type of firearm	Percent of prison inmates —					
	Armed during current offense		Ever armed while committing offense		Ever used or possessed firearm	
	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Firearm	18.4%	14.8%	25.1%	20.0%	46.9%	48.9%
Handgun	15.3	12.8	21.3	17.2	36.0	38.6
Rifle	1.3	1.3	2.0	1.9	12.4	14.6
Shotgun	2.4	2.0	3.5	3.0	13.7	15.6
Other	0.5	0.6	1.1	0.9	2.7	2.3
No firearm	81.6%	85.2%	74.9%	80.0%	53.1%	51.1%

Note: Detail do not add to total because inmates may have had more than one firearm.

**Table 2. Possession of firearms by State and Federal prison inmates, by whether the firearm was single shot, conventional semiautomatic, or military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic, 1997**

Specific type of firearm	Percent of prison inmates —					
	Armed during current offense		Ever armed while committing offense		Ever used or possessed firearm	
	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal
Single shot	9.9%	7.3%	14.2%	10.6%	31.0%	31.4%
Conventional semiautomatic	7.9	7.7	10.9	9.8	22.6	26.0
Military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic	1.5	1.7	2.5	2.3	5.6	5.6

Note: Columns do not add to total percent with firearms because inmates may have possessed more than one firearm. See text above and pages 14 and 15 for definitions.

<sup>1</sup>For definitions of firearms, see *Methodology* on pages 14 and 15.

<sup>2</sup>Phillip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, *Guns in America: Summary Report*, Washington, DC, Police Foundation, 1996, table 2.3.

if not lawfully possessed on September 13, 1994.<sup>5</sup>

**Of inmates who carried a firearm during their offense, 8 in 10 had a handgun**

Inmates reported that a handgun was their preferred firearm; of those carrying a firearm, 83% of State inmates and 87% of Federal inmates said that they carried a handgun during the offense for which they were serving their longest sentence. About 8% of State inmates who had carried a firearm during the commission of their crime reported having a military-style semiautomatic (7%) or fully automatic (2%) firearm, with some carrying both.

Type of firearm	Percent of prison inmates carrying a firearm during current offense	
	State	Federal
Handgun	83.2%	86.7%
Rifle	7.3	8.9
Shotgun	13.1	13.7
Single shot	53.9%	49.2%
Conventional semiautomatic	43.2	51.8
Military-style semiautomatic	6.8	9.3
Fully automatic	2.4	3.8
Number of inmates	190,383	12,936

Note: Inmates could report carrying more than one type of firearm. For definitions of weapon categories, see pages 2, 14, and 15.

**Firearm use during crimes increased from 1991 to 1997**

Over the 6 years between surveys of inmates, 1991-97, possession of a firearm during a crime increased from 16% to 18% of State inmates and from 12% to 15% of Federal inmates (table 3). Because of the growth in the prison population, the estimated number of inmates carrying a firearm increased dramatically — from 114,100 in 1991 to 190,400 in 1997 in State prisons and from 6,300 in 1991 to 12,900 in 1997 in Federal prisons. These estimates were based on inmates who reported carrying a firearm during the offense for which they received their longest sentence.

<sup>5</sup>See P.L. 103-22 and *Commerce in Firearms in the United States*, Department of the Treasury, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, February 2000, page C-5.

**Table 3. Possession of firearms, by type of offense, by State and Federal prison inmates, 1997 and 1991**

Current offense	Prison inmates			
	1997		1991	
	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense
<b>State</b>				
All inmates	1,037,241	18.4%	700,050	16.3%
Violent offense	483,713	30.2	323,653	29.1
Property offense	227,726	3.1	171,749	3.2
Drug offense	213,974	8.1	148,743	4.1
Public-order offense	99,396	19.1	47,001	16.1
<b>Federal</b>				
All inmates	87,466	14.8%	53,348	11.8%
Violent offense	12,604	35.4	9,113	38.0
Property offense	5,811	2.9	7,011	2.1
Drug offense	54,561	8.7	30,788	3.9
Public-order offense	12,708	27.3	4,964	28.5

**Table 4. Firearm possession during current offense, by type of offense, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Current offense	Prison inmates			
	State		Federal	
	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense
Violent offense	483,713	30.2%	12,604	35.4%
Homicide	135,493	42.9	1,273	39.3
Sexual assault	87,687	2.9	679	0.0
Robbery	145,318	34.5	8,554	40.3
Assault	95,756	31.2	1,108	26.0
Other violent	19,459	27.1	989	22.4
Property offense	227,726	3.1%	5,811	2.9%
Burglary	111,198	4.0	279	10.1
Other property	116,528	2.3	5,531	2.5
Drug offense	213,974	8.1%	54,561	8.7%
Possession	91,511	7.8	9,959	7.0
Trafficking	116,578	8.6	39,769	9.1
Other drug	5,885	3.1	4,834	8.7
Public-order offense	99,396	19.1%	12,708	27.3%
Weapons	25,257	64.9	5,905	51.9
Other public-order	74,139	3.5	6,803	5.9

**8% of drug offenders and 3% of property offenders armed while committing their crimes**

Fewer than 1 in 10 offenders serving a sentence for selling or carrying illegal drugs and 1 in 30 inmates in prison for a property crime — burglary, larceny, fraud, or destruction of property — had a firearm with them while committing their current offense (table 4).

Inmates who had been sentenced for violent crimes used firearms more often than other prisoners. They were more likely than property, drug, or

public-order offenders to have used or possessed a gun during their crime. An estimated 30% of violent offenders in State prisons and 35% in Federal prisons had a firearm at the time of the offense.

Offenders sentenced for homicide or for robbery reported the most extensive use of firearms. Among inmates sentenced for homicide, about 43% in State prisons and 39% in Federal prisons said they were carrying a firearm when they committed the offense. About 35% serving time for robbery in State prisons and 40% in Federal prison had a gun.

**Table 5. Possession of a firearm during current offense, by selected characteristics for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Selected characteristic	Prison inmates			
	State		Federal	
	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	972,572	19.1%	81,102	15.5%
Female	64,669	7.3	6,364	6.2
<b>Race/Hispanic origin</b>				
White	346,188	14.8%	25,977	16.7%
Black	482,302	21.1	33,100	17.7
Hispanic	176,089	17.6	24,040	8.1
Other	32,662	19.3	4,349	17.9
<b>Age</b>				
20 or younger	61,663	35.5%	935	23.0%
21-24	143,533	26.8	6,865	18.6
25-34	396,166	16.5	31,970	15.5
35-44	305,765	13.3	26,636	12.8
45-54	100,133	17.4	14,393	15.3
55 or older	29,980	21.7	6,667	13.0
<b>Educational attainment</b>				
Some high school or less	445,479	16.8%	25,642	13.9%
GED	260,743	23.6	17,150	19.2
High school diploma	190,805	16.7	21,292	14.5
Some college	110,122	16.5	15,233	15.1
College graduate	27,649	12.1	7,963	8.3
<b>Citizenship</b>				
United States	983,876	18.5%	71,307	16.9%
Latin America	47,257	14.5	14,638	5.7
Other	4,609	22.0	1,376	2.4
<b>Military service</b>				
Served	129,913	16.4%	12,746	17.2%
Did not serve	907,142	18.6	74,676	14.4

### Male inmates and young inmates carried firearms

Male State and Federal offenders were more likely than their female counterparts to have carried a firearm when committing their offense. About 19% of men in State prison and 16% in Federal prison reported using or possessing a firearm when committing their most serious offense, compared to 7% of women in State prison and 6% in Federal prison (table 5).

An estimated 21% of black non-Hispanic inmates in State prison, 18% of Hispanics, and 15% of white non-Hispanics said they had a gun with them while committing their most serious offense. About 18% of black and white inmates in Federal facilities and 8% of Hispanics had carried a firearm.

Young State inmates were more likely than older inmates to use firearms. About 29% of inmates under the age of 25 at the time of the survey were carrying a gun when they committed their current offense, compared to 15% of those 35 or older. Among Federal inmates, about 19% under age 25 and 14% age 35 or older said they had a gun with them.

### Weapon offenses and offenders

Weapon offenses include unlawful distribution, sale, manufacture, alteration, transport, possession, or use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or accessory. In 1998 an estimated 195,000 persons were arrested by State or local law enforcement or referred to a U.S. attorney for prosecution for a weapon offense — counting only the most important offense and no secondary offenses. Over 35,000 persons were convicted of a weapon offense. About 49,000 persons were in a local jail or State or Federal prison for a weapon offense in 1998. An additional 100,000 were serving a sentence in the community on probation, parole, or supervised release.

An estimated 12% of State prison inmates and 19% of Federal inmates were either currently serving a sentence for a weapon offense or had been sentenced for a weapon offense in the past.

### Weapons as the most serious offense or charge in the criminal justice system, 1998

	Number	Percent of total
<b>State/local jurisdictions</b>		
Arrested	190,600	1.3%
Defendants at initial filing	--	2.8
Convicted of a felony	31,904	3.4
In local jails	13,630	2.3
In State prisons	26,730	2.4
On probation/parole	100,440	2.3
<b>Federal jurisdiction</b>		
Received by U.S. attorneys as suspects	4,907	4.3%
Prosecuted	3,347	5.1
Convicted	3,413	5.6
In Federal prison	8,742	8.0
On probation/supervised release/parole	4,038	4.4

Note: The weapon offense is the offenders' most serious offense. Statistics on persons in Federal jurisdiction are for fiscal year 1998.

--Not available.

Sources: Data on weapon offenders come from the FBI's *Crime in the United States, 1998*, table 29; from BJS' *Compendium of Federal Justice Statistics, 1998*; from BJS' Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996, and Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997, and from the following BJS reports available through <[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/pubalp2.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/pubalp2.htm)>: *Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 1998*; *Felony Sentences in the United States, 1998*; *Prisoners in 1999*; and the press release for probation and parole surveys 2000.

### Current and past sentences for a weapon offense, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997

Any current or past offense	Percent of prison inmates	
	State	Federal
Total	100.0%	100.0%
Current or past weapon offense	12.2%	18.6%
Current and past weapon offenses	1.3	2.2
Current weapon/past other offenses	4.1	8.5
Current weapon/no past offenses	1.1	2.7
Current other/past weapon offenses	5.8	5.1
Other current and/or past offenses	87.8%	81.4%

**Table 6. State and Federal prison inmates possessing a firearm during their most serious offense, by characteristics of their family and background, 1997**

Inmates' family of origin and other background characteristics	Prison inmates			
	State		Federal	
	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense
Lived with growing up				
Both parents	455,313	16.3%	47,279	13.2%
Single parent	438,741	19.7	30,146	16.2
Other	137,253	20.7	9,452	18.8
Parent ever incarcerated	188,166	22.7%	9,843	18.0%
Parent never incarcerated	833,005	17.4	76,382	14.5
Parent received welfare	374,340	20.8%	20,328	20.0%
Parent did not receive welfare	634,795	17.0	65,146	13.2
Inmate lived in public housing	186,847	21.1%	11,807	17.9%
Inmate did not live in public housing	835,540	17.8	74,656	14.5
Parent abused alcohol or drugs	327,404	18.5%	18,041	17.6%
Alcohol	241,521	16.6	14,541	17.8
Drugs	18,618	27.5	735	17.7
Both	66,986	22.9	2,752	17.0
Parent did not abuse alcohol or drugs	698,716	18.3	68,424	14.1
Peers engaged in illegal activity while growing up	780,234	19.6%	49,941	19.0%
Used drugs	688,497	19.7	42,764	18.5
Damaged/stole/sold property*	616,874	21.1	33,793	22.6
Drug trafficking	395,042	24.3	20,731	22.4
Robbery	203,745	30.4	8,400	32.5
Peers did not engage in any illegal activity	249,739	14.6	36,718	9.3

\*Includes vandalism, shoplifting, stealing motor vehicles or parts, selling stolen property, and breaking and entering.

**Background characteristics account for relatively small differences in firearm use**

When inmates were interviewed for the 1997 Surveys, they were asked about their family background and experiences they had when growing up. Characteristics about which the inmates reported include parental upbringing, parental incarceration, welfare assistance to their family,

parental use of alcohol and drugs, and peer participation in criminal behavior.

Inmates who grew up living with both parents were less likely to be using or carrying a firearm than those who grew up primarily living with one parent, grandparents, other relatives, friends, or a foster family. An estimated 16% of State inmates and 13% of Federal inmates living with both parents had a gun with them, compared to 20% of State inmates and 17% of Federal

inmates living in some other arrangement while growing up (table 6).

A higher percentage of State inmates with a parent who had served a sentence to incarceration carried a gun (23%) than those whose parents had never been in prison or jail (17%). For Federal inmates, 18% of inmates who had incarcerated parents and 15% of those who did not carried a firearm.

Inmates who lived in families receiving welfare or living in publicly-subsidized housing while growing up were more likely than those who did not live under these types of government programs to be carrying a weapon. About 1 in 5 inmates whose family received welfare or who lived in publicly financed housing carried a firearm. About 1 in 6 State inmates and 1 in 7 Federal inmates whose parents were not receiving welfare benefits or living in publicly-financed housing had a gun.

A quarter of State inmates who said they had a parent who had abused drugs reported that they were carrying a gun while committing their current offense. In contrast, less than a fifth of those whose parents did not abuse substances had a firearm.

About 20% of State and Federal inmates whose friends while growing up used or traded drugs, stole, destroyed or damaged property, broke or entered private property, or robbed someone reported that they had a firearm with them when they committed their controlling offense. An estimated 15% of State inmates and 9% of Federal inmates who did not have friends involved in illegal activities

**Inmates who had ever been shot at**

As one measure of violence in inmates' lives, inmates were asked if they had ever been shot at. This

experience could have been at any time in their lives, including when they were committing the crime for which

they were in prison. About half of State prisoners reported that in the past they had been shot at by someone, and more than a fifth had actually been wounded by gunfire. A quarter of State and Federal inmates who had been shot at were carrying a firearm during their current offense, compared to a tenth of those who had never been shot at.

	State prison inmates		Federal prison inmates	
	Number	Percent carrying a firearm	Number	Percent carrying a firearm
Ever shot at with a gun	516,194	24.6%	30,064	24.0%
Wounded	213,429	26.7	12,933	24.4
Shot at but not wounded	302,765	23.1	17,131	23.6
Never shot at	514,676	12.1	56,679	10.1

used or possessed a firearm during their current offense.

**Violent recidivists were as likely as first time violent offenders to have carried a gun**

Recidivism does not appear to be related to whether inmates were carrying guns when the type of current offense is taken into account. Violent offenders who had served a prior sentence and first time violent offenders were about equally likely to be carrying a firearm when committing their current offense — about 30% of violent offenders in State prisons carried a firearm (table 7). About a third of violent Federal offenders, whether recidivist or first time, carried a firearm.

Less than 10% of both first time and repeat State offenders serving time for property, drug, and public-order offenses carried a gun. Drug offenders who were recidivists were more likely to be carrying a firearm than first-time drug offenders (9% versus 6% of State inmates and 11% versus 5% of Federal inmates).

Inmates who had served prior sentences as a juvenile were more likely to have had a gun than those who did not have a juvenile record. For State offenders 22% who had a juvenile record and 13% with only an adult record had a firearm while committing their current offense; for Federal offenders 27% with a juvenile record and 14% with only an adult record possessed a firearm.

**Inmates' retail purchase of firearms fell between 1991 and 1997**

In 1997, 14% of State inmates who had used or possessed a firearm during their current offense bought or traded for it from a retail store, pawnshop, flea market, or gun show (table 8). Nearly 40% of State inmates carrying a firearm obtained the weapon from family or friends. About 3 in 10 received the weapon from drug dealers, off the street, or through the black market. Another 1 in 10 obtained their gun during a robbery, burglary, or other type of theft.

From 1991 to 1997 the percent of State inmates with guns who acquired them at a retail outlet fell from 21% to 14%. At the same time the percentage reporting that they used firearms furnished by family or friends increased from 34% to 40%. Between the two surveys the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993 was enacted. The act requires background checks for persons purchasing firearms from federally licensed firearm dealers. Changes in how inmates obtained firearms, when the two surveys are compared, may or may not reflect the requirements in the Brady Act. Inmates may have procured their firearm or entered prison before the Brady Act became effective in 1994.

**Table 7. Possession of firearm during current offense, by criminal history, prior sentences, and criminal justice status at arrest, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Criminal justice characteristic	Prison inmates			
	State		Federal	
	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense	Number	Percent who possessed a firearm during current offense
<b>Criminal history</b>				
No previous sentence	247,287	22.3%	33,731	9.5%
Current offense				
Violent	155,195	31.1	3,952	31.8
Drug	44,744	5.8	20,425	4.8
Other	47,347	9.1	9,354	10.2
Recidivists	783,178	17.2	52,619	18.4
Current offense				
Violent	360,564	28.4	9,866	38.4
Drug	177,922	9.0	32,706	11.2
Other	244,692	6.5	10,047	22.3
<b>Prior sentences</b>				
Juvenile only	66,742	34.4%	2,835	25.8%
Adult only	404,646	12.7	34,294	13.5
Both juvenile and adult	309,002	19.4	15,897	27.3
<b>Criminal justice status at arrest</b>				
New court commitment	543,238	21.8%	63,320	13.7%
On status	489,320	14.6	23,628	17.8
Probation	229,952	15.0	11,644	14.0
Parole	252,355	14.1	11,736	21.3
Escape	7,013	17.9	248	32.9

**Table 8. Source of firearms possessed during the current offense of State prison inmates, 1997 and 1991**

Source of firearms	Percent of State prison inmates who possessed a firearm during current offense	
	1997	1991
Total	100.0%	100.0%
Purchased or traded from retail outlet	13.9%	20.8%
Retail store	8.3	14.7
Pawnshop	3.8	4.2
Flea market	1.0	1.3
Gun show	0.7	0.6
Family or friend	39.6%	33.8%
Purchased or traded	12.8	13.5
Rented or borrowed	18.5	10.1
Other	8.3	10.2
Street/illegal source	39.2%	40.8%
Theft or burglary	9.9	10.5
Drug dealer/off street	20.8	22.5
Fence/black market	8.4	7.8
Other	7.4%	4.6%

### Victims of violent offenders possessing firearms

About 30% of State inmates and 35% of Federal inmates sentenced for a violent offense — homicide, sexual assault, robbery, or assault — used or possessed a firearm when committing their current offense. A quarter of violent State prisoners and almost a third of Federal prisoners carried a handgun. Fewer than 1 in 10, however, carried a long gun — a rifle or shotgun — or a military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic weapon.

Inmates serving time for violent crimes were more likely to use a firearm when their victims were male rather than female, 18 or older rather than under age 18, and strangers, known by sight, or known casually rather than persons the inmates knew well.

- About 40% of violent State offenders who victimized a male had a gun compared to 17% of offenders when the victim was female.

- 39% of violent State inmates with a black victim and 33% of those with a Hispanic victim used a firearm, significantly more than the 25% with a white victim.

#### Possession of a firearm, by type of firearm, for State and Federal prison inmates sentenced for a violent offense, 1997

Type of firearm	Percent of prison inmates who possessed a firearm during current violent offense	
	State	Federal
Total	100%	100%
<b>Any firearm</b>	30.2%	35.4%
Handgun	24.7	30.4
Rifle	2.0	2.4
Shotgun	4.1	3.6
Other	0.7	1.2
Type of firearm		
Single shot	17.0%	18.0%
Conventional semiautomatic	12.1	16.3
Military-style semi-automatic or fully automatic	2.1	4.0

- Less than 10% of those who victimized persons 17 or younger, compared to over 33% of those who victimized persons 18 or older, possessed a firearm.

- Over a third of violent offenders used guns when their victims were strangers and casual acquaintances, compared to a fifth who used guns against persons they knew.

- 27% of offenders who victimized a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend were armed while committing the crime. About 8% used guns against other relatives, including children, siblings, and other family members.

#### Characteristics of victims of violent crime, by whether the State prison inmate possessed a firearm, 1997

Characteristics of victim	Percent of violent State prison inmates who possessed a firearm during current offense
Gender	
Male	39.8%
Female	16.8
Race/Hispanic origin	
White	25.4%
Black	38.6
Hispanic	32.8
Other	29.1
Age	
17 or younger	8.2%
18-24	40.9
25-34	37.0
35 or older	33.8
Relationship to offender	
Stranger	35.6%
Known by sight or casually	36.2
Well known	20.6
Intimate*	27.0
Other relative	8.2
Friend	26.3
Other	23.9

\*Includes spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, ex-boyfriend, and ex-girlfriend.

**Recidivists less likely than first timers to buy their gun from a retail establishment**

Although existence of a prior record did not change inmates' likelihood of having carried a gun while committing

their current crime, it did influence where they acquired their gun. Recidivists were less likely than those who were first time offenders to have purchased their gun from a retail store, pawnshop, flea market, or gun show. About a tenth of recidivists and a fifth

of first timers purchased their gun from a retail establishment (table 9).

A larger percentage of recidivists than first time offenders obtained their weapon through illegal activities or from the street or a black market source — 42% of recidivists and 31% of first timers.

Recidivists with firearms were as likely as first time offenders to obtain their gun from a family member or friends in 1997— about 40% acquired their guns from either family or friends.

The percentage of inmates who purchased or traded from a retail outlet, such as a store or pawnshop, fell during this period for both those with prior sentences and those without them. For repeat offenders, purchasing from retail fell from 17% to 11%, and for first time offenders from 33% to 20%.

For recidivists the percentage of inmates with firearms who obtained them from family or friends rose from 1991 to 1997 — for recidivists from 33% in 1991 to 39% in 1997 and for first timers from 36% in 1991 to 41% in 1997.

**Table 9. Source of firearms possessed during current offense, by criminal history, for State prison inmates, 1997 and 1991**

Source of firearms	Percent of State prison inmates possessing a firearm who were —			
	First timers		Recidivists	
	1997	1991	1997	1991
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Purchased or traded from a retail outlet	20.1%	32.9%	11.4%	16.8%
Retail store	14.2	25.5	6.0	11.0
Pawnshop	4.2	5.4	3.7	3.9
Flea market	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.4
Gun show	0.8	1.0	0.7	0.4
Family or friend	40.5%	36.1%	39.2%	33.1%
Purchased or traded	11.0	11.5	13.5	14.0
Rented or borrowed	20.0	12.9	17.9	9.3
Other	9.5	11.6	7.8	9.9
Street/illegal source	30.9%	26.7%	42.4%	45.7%
Theft or burglary	7.6	4.7	10.9	12.4
Drug dealer/off street	15.7	14.7	22.8	25.2
Fence/black market	7.6	7.3	8.8	8.1
Other	8.5%	4.4%	6.9%	4.3%
Number of prison inmates	51,152	22,444	127,664	70,728

**Victim, police, and inmate reports of gun use during violent crime**

The FBI reports that over two-thirds of homicide victims were killed with a firearm. About 4 in 10 inmates serving a sentence for murder or

manslaughter in State and Federal correctional facilities said that they had used a gun in committing the crime.

About 23% of robbery victims and 28% of aggravated assault victims told the National Crime Victimization Survey that the offender used a gun.

**Possession of firearms during violent crime, as reported by victims, police, and prison inmates, 1997**

Violent crime	Percent of victimizations in the National Crime Victimization Survey	Percent of offenses in the FBI's Supplemental Homicide Reports/Uniform Crime Reports	Percent of offenders possessing a firearm during a violent crime	
			Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities	Survey of Inmates in Federal Correctional Facilities
Homicide		67.8%	42.9%	39.3%
Sexual assault	2.4%		2.9	0.0
Robbery	23.0	39.7	34.5	40.5
Aggravated assault	28.4	20.0	31.2	26.0

**Table 10. Source of firearms possessed during current offense, by whether the firearm was single shot, conventional semiautomatic, or military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic, for State prison inmates, 1997**

Source of firearms	Percent of State prison inmates who possessed a firearm		
	Military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic	Conventional semiautomatic	Single shot
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Purchased or traded from a retail outlet	19.3%	16.5%	12.2%
Retail store	10.6	9.2	7.5
Pawnshop	6.7	4.7	3.4
Flea market	0.0	1.2	0.9
Gun show	1.9	1.4	0.4
Family or friend	25.2%	35.6%	43.8%
Purchased or traded	11.1	13.0	12.7
Rented or borrowed	10.6	15.7	21.5
Other	3.5	6.9	9.5
Street/illegal sources	48.5%	42.1%	36.4%
Theft or burglary	9.8	8.0	11.4
Drug dealer/off street	23.4	23.6	18.4
Fence/black market	15.4	10.6	6.7
Other	7.0%	5.8%	7.6%
Number of prison inmates	14,896	79,031	96,531

Note: See note on table 2 and definitions on page 14.

**Table 11. Source of firearms possessed during current offense, by gender and age, for State prison inmates, 1997**

Source of firearms	Percent of State prison inmates who possessed a firearm during their current offense, by gender and age				
	Male	Female	24 or younger	25-34	35 or older
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Purchased or traded from a retail outlet	13.8%	16.5%	6.6%	12.7%	21.9%
Retail store	8.3	10.6	2.6	7.0	15.0
Pawnshop	3.8	5.5	2.9	4.0	4.5
Flea market	1.0	0.4	0.1	0.9	1.9
Gun show	0.8	0.0	0.9	0.8	0.4
Family or friend	39.4%	46.4%	40.1%	38.9%	39.8%
Purchased or traded	12.9	5.9	13.0	12.1	13.3
Rented or borrowed	18.3	28.4	20.3	18.8	16.6
Other	8.2	12.1	6.8	8.1	9.9
Street/illegal sources	39.4%	30.5%	46.8%	41.2%	29.9%
Theft or burglary	9.9	13.1	10.0	9.8	10.1
Drug dealer/off street	21.0	13.0	27.8	22.9	12.1
Fence/black market	8.5	4.3	9.0	8.6	7.8
Other	7.4%	6.6%	6.5%	7.1%	8.5%
Number of prison inmates	174,488	4,421	57,194	60,818	60,897

**1 in 5 military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic guns bought from retail store**

About a fifth of inmates with a military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic weapon bought it retail — at a store, flea market, or gun show (table 10). About a sixth of inmates with a conventional semiautomatic weapon and an eighth with a single-shot gun also had made a retail purchase.

While family and friends provided a quarter of military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic firearms, they gave inmates over a third of the conventional semiautomatic weapons and just under half of the single-shot guns.

Almost half of inmates possessing military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic weapons, about two-fifths of those with conventional semiautomatic firearms, and over a third of offenders having single-shot guns had got their firearm in a theft or burglary, or from a drug dealer, fence, or black market.

**Young offenders less likely than older ones to have bought a firearm from a retail source**

Young offenders were less likely than older inmates to have bought their gun from a retail outlet (table 11). About 7% of inmates 24 or younger and 22% of those 35 or older obtained their gun from a retail outlet.

About half of inmates who were 24 or younger, compared to less than a third of those 35 or older, acquired their gun through illegal activities, a drug dealer, or a black market.

Among those possessing a firearm during their current offense, an estimated 17% of women and 14% of men purchased their guns from a retail establishment. About 3 in 10 women offenders and 4 in 10 male inmates acquired their firearms from a theft, burglary, drug dealer, fence, or black market. Family and friends provided guns to about 46% of female inmates with firearms and 39% of male inmates.

**Federal law may have disqualified over 8 in 10 inmates from buying a firearm**

The Gun Control Act of 1968, as amended, and other Federal statutes list conditions which disqualify an individual from possessing a firearm or purchasing it from a licensed dealer. Some of these conditions include a prior felony conviction or indictment, current illegal drug use or addiction, dishonorable discharge from the Armed Forces, or being a fugitive from justice, a mental incompetent, or a nonresident alien. The Brady Act,

effective in 1994, mandated that federally licensed firearm dealers obtain background checks of potential purchasers, based on the conditions of eligibility.

A slightly lower percentage of State prisoners who had a gun, compared to those who did not, reported having a characteristic which may have disqualified them, as defined by Federal law. About 84% of State inmates who had possessed a gun and 88% who did not have a gun may have met at least one of the conditions, as measured in the inmate survey (table 12).

Among State inmates, those with and without guns answered differently on only two conditions. About 50% of those with a firearm and 56% without had a prior sentence to incarceration; about 37% with a gun and 49% without were on probation or parole. On other factors, about the same percentages reported meeting a condition that could have made them ineligible to purchase a firearm. Almost 6 in 10 said they had used illegal drugs before their controlling offense, about 1 in 10 had stayed in a mental health facility overnight, and 1 in 20 was a noncitizen.

Higher percentages of Federal inmates with guns than without them reported meeting at least one of the conditions of the Federal laws. About 83% with a firearm and 78% without one may have been disqualified from purchasing a gun. Higher percentages of inmates using guns compared to those without a gun had a prior incarceration (55% versus 37%), were on probation or parole when arrested (32% versus 26%), or had used illegal drugs shortly before committing their current offense (56% versus 43%).

**9% of all State prison inmates and 2% of all Federal inmates shot a gun while committing their current offense**

In total, about 1 in 10 State inmates and 1 in 50 Federal inmates fired their gun while committing their current offense (table 13). Among inmates serving a sentence for a single violent crime incident, 18% of State inmates and 9% of Federal inmates said they fired the gun they were carrying.

**Table 12. Selected characteristics that may make a gun purchase illegal under Federal law, by possession of firearm during current offense, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Selected characteristic	Percent of inmates during current offense			
	State inmates		Federal inmates	
	Possessed firearm	Did not possess firearm	Possessed firearm	Did not possess firearm
Total meeting at least one condition which may have made inmates ineligible to purchase a firearm	84.1%	87.7%	83.1%	77.7%
Prior incarceration for serious offense	49.8	55.9	55.1	36.9
On probation or parole when arrested	37.0	48.9	32.0	26.0
On escape when arrested	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.2
Illegal drug use in month before or at time of offense	58.8	56.3	56.0	43.0
Ever treated overnight in mental health facility	10.7	10.7	6.7	4.2
Not a U.S. citizen	5.2	6.0	7.8	22.6
Dishonorable discharge from U.S. military	0.3	0.3	0.7	0.2

**Table 13. Extent of weapon use during current offense, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Firearm use	Percent of prison inmates					
	All inmates		Violent offenders		Other offenders	
	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Used firearm	20.4%	8.9%	38.5%	35.1%	4.3	3.5
Discharged	8.9	2.0	17.7	8.5	1.1	0.6
Did not discharge	11.5	6.9	20.7	26.6	3.2	2.9
Possessed but did not use	3.6	8.2	3.0	7.2	4.1	8.4
Possessed other weapon	1.0	0.5	1.4	2.7	0.6	0.1
Did not possess weapon	75.0	82.4	57.2	55.0	91.0	88.0
Number	993,305	71,325	468,757	12,249	515,532	58,266

Note: Table excludes prison inmates serving a sentence for multiple incidents.

**Table 14. Extent of firearm use during current offense for State and Federal prison inmates possessing a firearm, 1997**

Firearm use	Percent of prison inmates possessing a firearm	
	State	Federal
Total	100.0%	100.0%
Used firearm	80.2%	48.6%
Discharged	49.1	12.8
Killed victim	14.6	3.0
Injured victim	15.4	3.5
Neither killed nor injured	26.3	7.8
Brandished/displayed	73.2	46.2
To scare someone	48.6	29.3
To defend self	41.1	24.9
To "get away"	18.9	11.6
Did not actively use firearm	19.8%	51.4%
Number	178,646	11,250

Note: Percents of subtotals do not add to totals because inmates may have used a firearm in more than one way. Table excludes prison inmates serving a sentence for multiple incidents.

About 1% of inmates serving a sentence for a single property, drug, or public-order incident discharged a gun.

Fewer than 1 in 20 State inmates and 1 in 10 Federal inmates, regardless of type of offense, said they possessed a firearm but did not use it. Another 2% reported they had another weapon, including a knife, scissors, ax, rock, club or other sharp or blunt object.

**Table 15. Extent of firearm use during current offense, for State prison inmates possessing a firearm, 1997**

Firearm use	Percent of State prison inmates possessing a firearm		
	Military-style semiautomatic or fully automatic	Conventional semiautomatic	Single-shot
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Used firearm	74.6%	78.9%	80.8%
Discharged	42.9	46.3	50.6
Killed victim	11.2	13.5	15.7
Injured victim	14.2	15.1	15.3
Neither killed nor injured	23.4	24.0	27.3
Brandished/displayed	70.5	72.1	73.2
To scare someone	45.3	48.0	49.6
To defend self	39.7	42.4	39.9
To "get away"	20.4	18.5	18.7
Did not actively use firearm	25.4%	21.1%	19.2%
Number	14,280	76,010	96,810

Note: Percents of subtotals do not add to totals because inmates may have used a firearm in more than one way. Table excludes prison inmates serving a sentence for multiple incidents. See pages 2, 14, and 15 for definitions of firearms.

**About half of inmates carrying a gun during their offense fired it and half of those injured or killed someone**

If inmates carried a firearm, they tended to use it. Among inmates possessing a firearm and committing only one incident, four-fifths of State inmates and half of Federal inmates either fired the weapon or brandished or displayed it while committing the crime (table 14).

An estimated 23% of State inmates and 5% of Federal inmates with a gun either killed or injured their victim. Another 26% of State inmates and 8% of Federal inmates with a gun discharged the gun but did not injure or kill anyone with it.

Besides firing their weapon, inmates used their guns for other purposes. About half of State inmates said they used it to scare someone, about two-fifths to defend themselves, and a fifth to "get away."

About 81% of State inmates with a single-shot gun, 79% with a conventional semiautomatic, and 75% with a military-style semiautomatic weapon or a fully automatic weapon either fired or brandished it (table 15). About 51% with a single-shot gun, 46% with a conventional semiautomatic firearm, and 43% with a military-style semiautomatic weapon or a fully automatic weapon discharged their firearm. About a fifth either injured or killed their victim, regardless of the type of firearm.

About a quarter of inmates carrying military-style semiautomatic weapon or a fully automatic weapon and a fifth of those with a conventional semiautomatic or single-shot weapon did not actively use the gun in any way, discharging it or displaying it to scare someone, defend oneself, or "get away."

**Table 16. Sentence length and time to be served, by possession of a firearm and type of offense, for State prison inmates, 1997**

Current offense	Sentence length in months				Time expected to be served			
	Possessed firearm		Did not possess firearm		Possessed firearm		Did not possess firearm	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Total	220 mo	180 mo	150 mo	96 mo	126 mo	91 mo	83 mo	52 mo
Violent offense	252	240	216	180	147	115	126	87
Homicide	330	480	352	600	196	172	209	182
Sexual assault	444	480	232	180	212	206	131	97
Robbery	232	180	192	120	125	94	102	72
Assault	177	120	133	96	101	75	83	59
Property offense	177	120	123	72	87	72	64	44
Drug offense	143	108	107	60	60	48	49	36
Public-order offense	98	60	78	48	55	40	46	28

**Possession of a firearm during an offense increased sentences and expected time served of inmates**

On average, inmates possessing a firearm had longer sentences and expected to serve a longer time than those who had not used or possessed a firearm while committing their offense. Sentences for State inmates with firearms had an average of about 18 years, while those for inmates without a firearm were about 12 years (table 16). Those who had carried a firearm expected to serve about 10 years on their sentence, and those without a firearm, 7 years.

Violent offenders with firearms had on average a sentence of over 20 years and those without firearms, about 18

years. Violent offenders who had carried a gun also expected to serve 12 years on average and those who did not carry them, 10 years.

Significantly higher percentages of inmates who possessed firearms, compared to those who did not, received a sentence enhancement, generally for possessing a firearm. About 40% of State inmates who carried a firearm during their current offense and 6% who were not carrying a firearm were given an enhancement to their sentence because of a firearm offense (table 17). About 56% of Federal inmates who carried a firearm and 14% who did not carry one received a weapons offense enhancement.

**Methodology**

The U.S. Census Bureau conducted the 1997 Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities (SISCF) for the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and the 1997 Survey of Inmates in Federal Correctional Facilities (SIFCF) for BJS and the Bureau of Prisons. From June through October, 1997, inmates were interviewed about their current offense and sentences, criminal histories, family and personal backgrounds, gun possession and use, prior drug and alcohol use and treatment, educational programs, and other services provided while in prison. Similar surveys of State prison inmates were conducted in 1974, 1979, 1986, and 1991. Federal inmates were surveyed for the first time in 1991.

*Sample design*

The samples for the SISCF and SIFCF were taken from a universe of 1,409 State prisons and 127 Federal prisons enumerated in the 1995 Census of State and Federal Adult Correctional Facilities or opened between completion of the census and June 30, 1996. The sample design for both surveys was a stratified two-stage selection; first, selecting prisons, and second, selecting inmates in those prisons.

In the first stage correctional facilities were separated into two sampling frames: one for prisons with male inmates and one for prisons with female inmates. Prisons holding both genders were included on both lists.

**Table 17. Sentence enhancements, by possession of a firearm during current offense, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Enhancements to sentence	Percent of inmates during current offense			
	State inmates		Federal inmates	
	Possessed firearm	Did not possess firearm	Possessed firearm	Did not possess firearm
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
No enhancement	49.6%	70.3%	31.1%	57.7%
Any enhancement	50.4%	29.7%	68.9%	42.3%
Firearm offense	39.9	5.5	55.7	13.7
2nd or 3rd strike	16.4	20.0	26.0	18.5
Type of drug offense*	7.0	9.8	23.3	25.7

\*Type of drug offense includes type of drug, quantity of drug, or activity involved with the drug offense.

In the sampling of State facilities, the 13 largest male prisons and 17 largest female prisons were selected with certainty. The remaining 1,265 male facilities and 261 female facilities were stratified into 14 strata defined by census region (Northeast except New York, New York, Midwest, South except Texas, Texas, West except California, and California). Within each stratum facilities were ordered by facility type (confinement and community-based), security level (maximum, medium, minimum, and none), and size of population. A systematic sample of prisons was then selected within strata with probabilities proportionate to the size of each prison.

For the sample of Federal prisons, one male prison and two female prisons were selected with certainty. The remaining 112 male facilities were classified into 5 strata defined by security level (administrative, high, medium, low, and minimum). The 20 remaining female facilities were stratified into 2 strata by security level (minimum and not minimum). Within security level, facilities were ordered by size of population and then selected with probability proportionate to size.

For the State survey 280 prisons were selected, 220 male facilities and 60 female facilities. Of the 280 facilities 3 refused to allow interviewing and 2 closed before the survey could be conducted. Overall, 32 male facilities and 8 female facilities were selected for the Federal survey, and all participated.

In the second stage, inmates were selected for interviewing. For State facilities interviewers selected the sample systematically using a random start and a total number of interviews based on the gender of the inmates and the size of the facility. For Federal facilities, a sample of inmates was selected for each facility from the Bureau of Prisons central list, using a random start and predetermined sampling interval.

All selected drug offenders were then subsampled so that only a third were eligible for interview. As a result, approximately 1 in every 75 men and 1 in 17 women were selected for the State survey, and 1 in every 13 men and 1 in every 3 women were selected for the Federal survey.

A total of 14,285 interviews were completed for the State survey and 4,041 for the Federal survey, for overall response rates of 92.5% in the State survey and 90.2% in the Federal survey.

The interviews, about an hour in length, used computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). With CAPI, computers provide questions for the interviewer, including follow-up questions tailored to preceding answers. Before the interview, inmates were told verbally and in writing that participation was voluntary and that all information provided would be held in confidence. Participants were assured that the survey was solely for statistical purposes and that no individual who participated could be identified through use of survey results.

#### *Estimates of prisoner counts*

Based on the completed interviews, estimates for the entire population were developed using weighting factors derived from the original probability of selection in the sample. These factors were adjusted for variable rates of nonresponse across strata and inmates' characteristics and offenses. The sample for the State survey was adjusted to midyear custody counts for June 30, 1997, from data obtained in the National Prisoner Statistics series (NPS-1A). The sample from the Federal facilities was weighted to the total known sentenced custody population at midyear 1997.

Excluded from the estimate of Federal inmates were unsentenced inmates and those prisoners under Federal jurisdiction but housed in State and private contract facilities. Those prisoners who were under State jurisdiction, yet held in local jails or private facilities, were excluded from the estimated number of State prisoners. As a result, the estimated prisoner counts do not match those in other BJS data series. The estimated prisoner counts vary according to the particular data items analyzed. Estimates are based on the number of prisoners who provided information on selected items.

#### *Accuracy of the estimates*

The accuracy of the estimates presented in this report depends on two types of error: sampling and nonsampling. Sampling error is the variation that may occur by chance because a sample rather than a complete enumeration of the population was conducted. Nonsampling error can be attributed to many sources, such as nonresponses, differences in the interpretation of questions among inmates, recall difficulties, and processing errors. In any survey the full extent of the nonsampling error is never known. The sampling error, as measured by an estimated standard error, varies by the size of the estimate and the size of the base population.

Estimates of the standard errors have been calculated for the 1997 surveys. (See appendix tables 1 and 2.) For example, the 95-percent confidence interval around the percentage of State inmates who carried a firearm during current offense is approximately 18.4% plus or minus 1.96 times 0.42% (or 17.6% to 19.2%).

These standard errors may also be used to test the significance of the difference between two sample statistics by pooling the standard errors of the two sample estimates. For example, the standard error of the difference between violent or drug offenders carrying firearms when committing their current offense would be 1.0% (or the square root of the sum of the squared standard errors for each group). The 95%-confidence interval around the difference would be 1.96 times 1.0% or 1.9%. Since the difference, 22.1% (30.2% - 8.1%) is greater than 1.9%, the difference would be considered statistically significant.

The same procedure can be used to test the significance of the difference between estimates from the two surveys. For example, the standard error of the difference between Federal and State prison inmates carrying a firearm would be 0.9%. The 95-percent confidence interval around the difference would be 1.96 times .9% (or 1.7%). Since the difference of 3.6% (18.4% minus 14.8%) is greater than 1.6%, the difference would be considered statistically significant.

All comparisons discussed in this report were statistically significant at the 95-percent confidence level.

**Definitions**

The survey questionnaire used the following definitions in language and terms familiar to the respondents. Interviewers read the definitions to the inmates when needed.

**Handguns** include both pistols and revolvers. They are firearms held and fired with one hand and include the following:

— *Revolver* is a handgun with a revolving cylinder with several cartridge chambers. The chambers are successively lined up with the barrel and then discharged. (Classified as *single shot* for analysis.)

— *Derringer* is a short-barreled, single shot pocket pistol. A pistol has a chamber integral with the barrel. (Classified as *single shot* for analysis.)

— A *conventional semiautomatic pistol* uses a shell which is ejected and the next round of ammunition is loaded automatically from a magazine or clip internal to the pistol grip or handle. The trigger must be pulled for each shot.<sup>5</sup> (Classified as *conventional semiautomatic* for analysis.)

— *Military-style semiautomatic pistol* is similar to a conventional semiautomatic pistol except that the magazine or clip is visible.<sup>5</sup> Primary examples are the UZI, TEC-9, and MAC-10.

<sup>5</sup>The survey interview included in the operational definition of a conventional semiautomatic pistol "can hold a maximum of 19 bullets" and of a military-style semiautomatic pistol "can hold more than 19 bullets."

**Appendix table 1. Standard errors for type of firearm during current offense, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Type of firearm	Standard error for estimated percent armed during current offense	
	State	Federal
Any firearm	0.42%	0.75%
Handgun	0.39	0.70
Rifle	0.12	0.24
Shotgun	0.17	0.29
Single shot	0.33	0.55
Semiautomatic		
Conventional	0.30	0.56
Military-style	0.13	0.27

Note: See tables 1 and 2 for survey estimates.

(Classified as *military-style semiautomatic* for analysis.)

A **rifle** is a firearm intended to be shot from the shoulder. It has a long barrel which shoots bullets. Types include:

— *Bolt-action, pump-action, lever-action, or single-shot rifles* require physical movement by the operator of some part of the rifle — a bolt, lever, or pump — to reload. A single shot rifle must be loaded after each shot. (Classified as *single shot* for analysis.)

— *Semiautomatic hunting-style rifle* is a rifle in which a shell is ejected and the next round of ammunition is loaded automatically from a magazine or clip. The trigger must be pulled for each shot. (Classified as *conventional semiautomatic* for analysis.)

— *Semiautomatic military-style rifle* has the characteristics of a semiautomatic hunting-style rifle. It also has military features such as a pistol grip, folding stock, flash suppressor, and bayonet mount. (Classified as *military-style semiautomatic* for analysis.)

A **shotgun** is a firearm intended to be shot from the shoulder with either a single- or double-barrel for firing shot

**Appendix table 2. Standard errors for firearm possession during current offense, for State and Federal prison inmates, 1997**

Current offense	Standard error for estimated percent armed during current offense	
	State	Federal
Violent offense	0.74%	2.66%
Homicide	1.50	8.52
Sexual assault	0.63	0.00
Robbery	1.39	3.31
Assault	1.67	8.21
Other violent	3.55	8.26
Property offense	0.41%	1.37%
Burglary	0.66	11.23
Other property	0.49	1.31
Drug offenses	0.65%	0.73%
Possession	0.98	1.59
Trafficking	0.90	0.86
Other drug	2.52	2.52
Public-order offenses	1.39%	2.46%
Weapons	3.35	4.05
Other public-order	0.75	1.78

Note: See table 4 for survey estimates.

(a concentration of small pellets) at short ranges. Types include:

— *Bolt-action, pump-action, lever-action, or single shot shotgun* requires physical movement by the operator of some part of the shotgun — a bolt, lever, or pump — to reload. A single shot shotgun must be loaded after each shot. (Classified as *single-shot* for analysis.)

— *Semiautomatic hunting-style shotgun* is a shotgun in which a shell is ejected and the next round of ammunition is loaded automatically from a magazine or clip. The trigger must be pulled for each shot. (Classified as *conventional semiautomatic* for analysis.)

— *Semiautomatic military-style shotgun* has the characteristics of a semiautomatic hunting-style shotgun.

In addition, the shotgun has military features, such as a pistol grip, folding-stock, and detachable magazine or clip. It looks like a semiautomatic military-style rifle. (Classified as *military-style semiautomatic* for analysis.)

A **semiautomatic gun** is a firearm in which a shell is ejected and the next round of ammunition is loaded automatically from a magazine or clip. The trigger must be pulled for each shot. Semiautomatic guns may be classified as handguns, rifles, or shotguns.

A **machine gun** is an automatic gun which, if the trigger is held down, will fire rapidly and continuously. It is not a semi-automatic gun for which the trigger must be pulled for each shot. (Classified as *fully automatic* for analysis.)

A **BB gun** shoots a single pellet, using air rather than an explosive to propel the pellet. (Excluded from analysis, as were toy guns.)

This report in portable document format and in ASCII, its tables, and related statistical data are available at the BJS World Wide Web Internet site:

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>

The data for this report may be obtained from the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data at the University of Michigan. The archive may be accessed through the BJS website.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics is the statistical agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. Lawrence A. Greenfeld is the acting director.

BJS Special Reports address a specific topic in depth from one or more datasets that cover many topics. Caroline Wolf Harlow wrote this report.

Tom Bonczar and Lara Reynolds provided statistical assistance and verification. Terry Austin, Chief, National Tracing Center Division of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, provided comments. Tom Hester and Tina Dorsey edited the report. Jayne Robinson administered final production.

November 2001, NCJ 189369