



Violence and beyond: Life-course features of handgun carrying in the urban United States and the associated long-term life consequences



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Although previous research has made progress in identifying correlates of risky gun-related behavior and its impact on violence and injury, particularly during adolescence, it is not clear how individuals differ in their gun carrying behavior over time or how developmental features of carrying affect experiences and accomplishments later in the life.

Methods: Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), we delineated age-specific patterns of handgun carrying in the urban United States and investigated how onset age, duration, and timing of handgun carrying affected criminal offending, substance use, police arrest, and educational and economic achievements in established adulthood.

Results: There is important heterogeneity in individuals' handgun carrying behavior over time in the urban United States. Developmental features of handgun carrying are significant predictors of negative life outcomes in a variety of domains.

Conclusions: Individuals who carry firearms should not be assumed as of one general type. Efforts to prevent risky gun-related behavior and associated negative long-term consequences can be better targeted if we take into account developmental heterogeneity in such behavior.

1. Introduction

Gun violence causes serious mortality and morbidity among adolescents and young adults in the United States. For individuals between 10 and 34, homicide is the third leading cause of death (following unintentional injury and suicide) and 85% of homicide deaths involve a firearm (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017a). On average, twenty-three 10 to 34 year olds are killed by gunshot assault each day; for each individual that dies of a gunshot assault, five more will survive, undergoing extensive treatment in hospital emergency departments (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017b). In effect, many young victims of homicide and serious assault have been shot in the past, and thus had to endure physical, emotional and economic consequences due to injury and violence for years. Some of these victims were perpetrators too, indicating the importance of tackling this issue from both a public health and criminal justice perspective.

Individuals younger than 18 years are prohibited from carrying handguns in most states unless under direct supervision by parents or guardians (Molnar, Miller, Azrael, & Buka, 2004; Vaughn, Salas-Wright,

Boutwell, DeLisi, & Curtis, 2017). Nevertheless, data from large-scale national studies reveal notable levels of self-reported gun carrying among American youth. For instance, using data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), Grunbaum et al. (2002) found that 5.7% of high school students in the United States reported carrying a firearm in the preceding 30 days in 2001.¹ More recently, using data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), Vaughn, Nelson, Salas-Wright, DeLisi, and Qian (2016) estimated that the prevalence of handgun carrying in the past year among adolescents ages 12–17 in the United States was 3.4% (See also Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001 for a review).

Given the extent of handgun carrying behavior among American youth and its well-established contribution to violent injuries (Ash & Kellerman, 2001; Lowry, Powell, Kann, Collins, & Kolbe, 1998; Pickett et al., 2005), considerable research has dedicated to identifying correlates of handgun carrying. Important risk factors include being male, minority background, prior exposure to violence, individual history of substance use, poor academic performance, low self-control and esteem, family poverty, inadequate parenting, neighborhood

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¹ The YRBSS data showed that 7.9% of students reported carrying a gun in the previous 30 days in 1993; 7.6% of students had carried a gun during the previous 30-day period in 1995; and 5.9% of students reported gun-carrying behavior in 1997 (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001).

disadvantage and disorder, peer delinquency and gang affiliation, and involvement in drug dealing and other criminal activities (Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, & Howard, 2000; Molnar et al., 2004; Simon, Richardson, Dent, Chou, & Flay, 1998; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2003; Tigri, Reid, Turner, & Devinney, 2016; Vaughn et al., 2016, 2017; Wallace, 2017). Although corresponding preventive interventions based on risk-factor research have been implemented at different socio-ecological levels, their effects are modest at best (Bushman et al., 2016; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001).

To further improve the effectiveness of preventive interventions against risky gun carrying, three important issues call for additional research. First, heterogeneity in handgun carrying behavior needs to be better understood. Although the overall prevalence of handgun carrying behavior among youth is known, it is not yet clear how that prevalence varies by age. Also, different sociodemographic groups may exhibit distinct age-graded patterns of handgun carrying. From a life-course perspective, onset age, duration, and timing of carrying are important features for understanding heterogeneity in handgun carrying but as of yet are understudied. Second, existing research has mainly examined the immediate or short-term impact of handgun carrying on injury and violence during adolescence or emerging adulthood. Additional research is needed to investigate its long-term consequences in established adulthood as many life transitions are completed. Third and related, it is necessary to examine how developmental features of handgun carrying are related to life outcomes in multiple domains. For instance, if handgun carrying is correlated with educational and economic underachievement beyond emerging adulthood, addressing gun carrying behavior may have longer term benefits than solely those related to youth injury and violence prevention. The current investigation aims to address these three important issues.

1.1. Handgun carrying in a life-course perspective

The life-course perspective emphasizes the importance of treating behavior as constantly changing as various needs, interests, opportunities, and events impinge upon actors as individuals age (Baltes, 1987). To date, criminologists have agreed on the significance of studying initiation, length/duration, timing, and escalation and de-escalation of offending behavior, investigating distinct origins and consequences associated with each of these developmental features (Farrington, 2005; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 2005; Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). Accordingly, individual behavior, including handgun carrying, should not simply be treated as a dichotomy of “yes” versus “no”; rather, it is imperative to take into account developmental heterogeneity or age-specific patterns when studying a particular behavior.

With regard to handgun carrying, we consider age of onset, duration, and developmental stage potentially important. Early onset of handgun carrying represents a marker for serious and extensive involvement in law-violating behavior (Spano, 2012). Life-course theories suggest that an earlier onset of antisocial behavior indicates a greater likelihood of combination and interaction of risks from multiple domains including neuropsychological deficit and difficult temperament, ineffective parenting, and adverse position in the social structure (Moffitt, 1993; Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). For instance, children who grew up in disadvantaged and disordered neighborhoods were frequently exposed to violence; intertwined with negative temperament and inadequate parental attachment and supervision, these individuals are likely to initiate their gun carrying very early in life. As an individual ages into adolescence, greater peer influence should be taken into account. In addition to self-protection, status-seeking or imitation become important reasons for the initiation of handgun carrying when

youth are striving for “age-appropriate autonomy” (Conger, 1991); adolescent peer networks are partially closed to adult authority (e.g. parents or teachers) while valuing behaviors that demonstrate separation or rebellion from adult authority. Additionally, social contagion of fear and violent identities contribute to an expansion of gun carrying behavior among adolescents (Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996). Eventually, individuals who initiate handgun carrying during adulthood are more likely to go through deliberation and possess required knowledge and skills to handle a firearm than are early initiators. In short, we hypothesize that an earlier onset of handgun carrying is related to heightened risk in criminal offending as well as other adversities in the life-course.

While early onset of antisocial behavior is often associated with a prolonged duration of involvement, the strength of that connection is modest (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001, 2005). Among earlier initiators some will persist, but many others will desist; similarly, among later initiators some will try out and desist relatively quickly, but others will continue. Two developmental processes are important in understanding the prolonged duration of handgun carrying and its impact on long-term consequences. First, there is stability in the risk factors that lead to handgun carrying. For instance, families experiencing extreme levels of structural disadvantage do not often escape from that adversity, and the development of children raised under such circumstances is constantly compromised; there is continuity in inadequate parenting, introduced by the constancy of the social environment in which these families often find themselves (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Also, negative temperament and neuropsychological deficits are found relatively stable in the life-course (Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014; Moffitt, Lynam, & Silva, 1994).

The second process pertains to developmental consequences of earlier events. Handgun carrying generates a range of negative consequences that set up a temporal contagion process. These negative consequences then evoke undesirable, reciprocal relationships with the surrounding environment, which, in turn, reinforce the continuity of handgun carrying. For instance, Loughran, Reid, Collins, and Mulvey (2016) found that despite materially worse outcomes in exposure to violence both as a victim and witness, gun carrying led to lower *perceptions* of risks and costs and higher *perceived* rewards of criminal offending. Other collateral consequences include that handgun carrying elicits coercive and punitive responses from parents or the school system, which set individuals further apart from conventional institutions (e.g. through conflict in parent-child relationship or school expulsion/failure). Young carriers are also likely to be rejected by conventional peers and thus have to affiliate with delinquent ones. Given that peers replace parents as major sources of social approval and support during adolescence (Uchino, 2004), delinquent peers (especially gang members) help define and endorse pro-gun carrying attitudes and behaviors, which eventually contribute to unstructured routine activities or deviant life styles, and the formation of deviant self-identity (Lizotte et al., 2000; Tigri et al., 2016; Watkins, Huebner, & Decker, 2008; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001). Moreover, the *drug involvement* model associates gun-carrying with the use and distribution of drugs (Blumstein, 1995; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2003). On the one hand, drug use affects the physiological functioning of an individual, leading to decreases in self-control and increases in aggression, and perhaps indirectly, gun carrying; on the other hand, young people's involvement in drug sales facilitates gun possession and carrying.

However, there is also a social process that may explain a brief involvement or desistance from handgun carrying. As the age of onset increases, the strength of the causal force diminishes. That is, “the causal factors are less numerous, less extreme, and less intertwined. Because of that, they are also less likely to be highly stable over time”

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