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Guns, Violence, and Criminal Behavior: The Offender's Perspective

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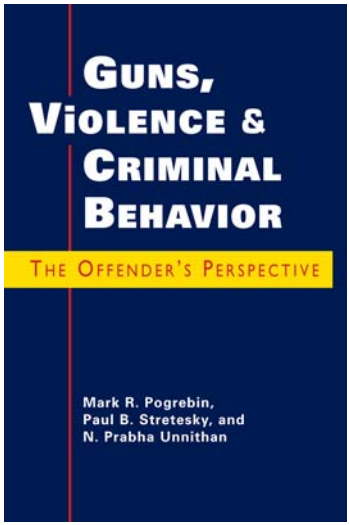

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Introduction: The Gun Offender's Perspective

ANY STUDY THAT SEEKS TO EXPLAIN GUN VIOLENCE MUST BEGIN by asking the why and how of the actual offense. We believe that the best way to approach the study of gun violence is to talk with offenders who have used a gun in the commission of a violent crime. *Guns, Violence, and Criminal Behavior: The Offender's Perspective* tells the stories of individuals who have used a firearm in the commission of a violent crime. The focus is on the offenders and their views on various subjects about guns generally and their own illegal use specifically. We explore important issues regarding multiple dimensions of gun-related violence based on first-hand narratives elicited from gun offenders who discuss those whys and hows. The offenders who speak throughout this book relate their experiences and perceptions about guns and the violent events that resulted in their incarceration. However, this book is not only about gun use during the commission of a violent crime. It is also about the offenders who were willing to be interviewed and tape-recorded for the study.

The Offender's Perspective

We believe that the best way to grasp the meaning and interpretation of the offender's violent crime is to ask inmates about their experiences with firearms and how they came to use guns to kill or injure

others. The stories told by the inmates in this book confront their own thoughts about guns and the use of guns in violent events. They share their views about gangs and firearms, the time of incarceration as it impacts opinions about various uses of firearms, and their ideas concerning the pros and cons of citizens being permitted to more easily carry concealed weapons. We collected all of the data as it was narrated to us by the offenders. We tape-recorded each offender's story so that we could examine his or her perceptions about guns, violence, and criminal behavior. As the interviews progressed, it became clear to us that there exists a method to what is often perceived as the madness of violent gun use. As inmates related their own stories, along with our probing on relevant issues, a pattern of attitudes and thoughts developed. Inmates often described the incidents that led up to their violent events as being determined by forces outside of their control. Many inmates claimed that they believe they had no other choice in the situation but to use their gun to harm, murder, or intimidate another person. In short, they constantly related their reconstruction of the events that caused them to feel that their use of the firearm was rational at the time. To them, it was the only possible choice they could have made at the moment.

What is striking about the majority of the criminological literature on gun offending is just how few studies are based methodologically on the perspectives and life stories of the gun users themselves. Large-scale survey research data on gun use have much to offer. However, even with the collection of data from a great number of respondents and the presentation of the results of sophisticated statistical analyses, it has not been possible to fully represent just who these violent gun offenders are; to directly assess the life histories that caused them to think about violent gun use the way that they do; or to adequately explain the series of decisions that led to violent, and sometimes deadly, outcomes.

This research, then, attempts to present new ideas about men and women who see the use of guns in the various circumstances of everyday life as reasonable. By looking at gun use through the eyes of those who have been found guilty of a violent gun-related offense, we give each inmate the opportunity to discuss issues that many law-abiding citizens in the community ask about them, but rarely receive answers to. Although the subject of gun use in the commission of a felony is a fascinating one, the people we interviewed (i.e., the actual perpetrators of such violent acts) are even more interesting to us as

researchers. By discovering who these gun users are, it was possible for us to cut through the stereotypical definitions of such people. All of us in society at one time or another have asked the question: What kind of person would commit such a criminal act? We often think of such offending individuals as despicable and subhuman. We would never want to personally get to know a murderer and certainly never become acquainted informally with a person of that character. We think of violent gun offenders as individuals who are very different from ourselves, who reside in a community unlike ours, or who associate with a dissimilar and particularly loathsome social group. These offenders appear poles apart from the middle-class mainstream so that we can in no way relate to them. Yet as the interviews progressed, we began to realize that the inmates we spoke with actually are not that different from the rest of society. Let us explain.

We do not deny the amount of damage and the seriousness of the harm that these inmates have caused. We do not empathize with their acts that have destroyed lives, families, and communities. At the same time, we believe that most members of society would argue that they would never use a gun to harm others. This perception is understandable because those individuals who would utilize violent means for conflict resolution or for material gain (or both) are just plain frightening to most of us. But if it were possible to take away these inmates' prison garb and current state of incarceration and place them in the community, the majority of us would have a difficult time identifying them as criminals. Our false stereotypes of violent offenders (Swigert and Farrell 1977) and just who they are, what they look like, and how their acts portray them to us result in a false sense of the existence of physical and social differences. These differences allow us to go about our lives with the view that we could never indulge in or be impacted by such violence. This sense of difference prompted us to ask the interviewees several questions about violent gun use: Who are you and what is your background? Why do people use violent means to solve conflicting interpersonal disputes? What do you think about the use of guns and the numerous policy issues that surround the ease of acquiring guns and their widespread availability? We share their answers to these questions as well as their stories throughout this book.

This study of gun-offending persons was funded by the US Department of Justice's Project Safe Neighborhoods program, which had as its primary goal the elimination of illegal guns within the com-

munities in our country. The granting agency, the US Attorney's Office in Colorado, was most interested in where illegal firearms were procured and how they were used to commit crimes. Although we were interested in the same questions, we felt it necessary to expand this research by probing about multiple issues in addition to those questions requested by the sponsoring agency. For us, the necessity to inquire about gun issues and social and criminal histories provided us with some insight into the lives of gun offenders before they committed their violent actions. Further, our approach of utilizing intensive semistructured interviewing provided the participants with an opportunity to relate their life story or event history retrospectively in some sequential order. In summary, by telling about their lives before incarceration, the interviewees were able to relate their life experiences in some logical and meaningful fashion and in a way that led them to the actual event or events that resulted in their current incarceration.

It certainly could be argued that retrospective accounts of an individual's prior criminal activities are a mixture of fact and fantasy, with damaging information withheld, particularly facts pertaining to the actual harm the offender may have done to the victim as a result of his or her violent behavior. We do not disagree with this argument, except to note that the embellished story that an inmate may tell is just as important to the research as the factual data. That is, we are and should be interested in accounts of events, even those that may have been manipulated retrospectively. At the same time, it should be noted that we had access to the official prison file of each inmate before we interviewed him or her. These files contained information such as prior probation reports, police reports, and criminal history. This permitted us to make a judgment concerning the veracity of the interviewee's recounting of events that led up to the current incarceration. In general, the majority of the interviewees related their past history, at least the criminal part, closely to the facts that we found in their prison file.

After meeting and interviewing the very people who have used firearms in their offenses, we as researchers came away from the experience with a different view of who these offenders are. In a small way, our hidden stereotypes of violent gun users also changed. Like everyone else, we had read newspaper reports and watched the nightly news, which subconsciously influenced our thoughts about these offenders. Thus, perhaps we were somewhat jaded in our per-

ceptions of the study participants prior to the interviews. Suffice it to say that we also learned that a person does not have to be socialized into some form of criminal culture over a long period of time to end up in prison for using a firearm for criminal purposes. We need to point out at this particular juncture that major differences in the backgrounds of the gun offenders represented in this study are too numerous to justify such an assumption.

The foregoing discussion needs additional commentary that puts the stereotype of violent gun offenders in some perspective. That is, it is necessary for us to clarify just who the inmates we interviewed were. After spending considerable time interviewing the study population about the crime that led to their current conviction and imprisonment, together with their life and criminal histories, we came to the realization that not everyone who uses a firearm for the purposes of monetary gain or actually shoots another person for any reason is similar in nature. Although we found many similarities in patterns of thinking and perception among these gun offenders, we also found just as many differences. What we intend to make clear to readers, at this point, is the realization that the interviews revealed a number of gun offenders who were not steeped in a culture of crime, but who in fact were never involved in any criminal activity except for occasional recreational drug use. Thus, students of gun violence should understand the distinct differences that exist between what we term *novice* gun offenders and those who are more *experienced* and whose involvement in criminal activity in general is characterized by a long and violent history. For many, violence came neither easily nor automatically (Collins 2008). In a sense, it is safe to say that, ultimately, all of the interviewees had only one thing in common: very long sentences in Colorado prisons.

By way of example, we found a 19-year-old woman who shot and killed her boyfriend before shooting herself because, as she claims, he withdrew his affection for her and she could not live without him. In contrast, we interviewed a repeat offender in his forties who had a long and violent history of criminal activity. He shot and killed an elderly man while attempting to get him to open his safe. This particular offender is much different from the young man who shot and killed his stepfather after he had abused his mother and himself for many years. And that young man is as different from the methamphetamine user and seller we talked with who shot his girlfriend's sister when he was high and had not slept for two days. He had a long record of prior

incarcerations for various other felonies. Despite the fact that we elicited responses to various important subjects from this sample of gun-using inmates, readers will have to make their own conclusions about the offenders whose accounts of their heinous crimes and perceptions of guns are reproduced in this book.

The voices of the gun offenders in this study provided us with insight into gun violence. We learned about their rationale for committing those crimes. Although the type of conflicting situations in which these offenders found themselves quite often made little sense to those of us looking in from the outside, we were able to gain some valuable insight into their beliefs and perceptions. Our findings describe the thought processes and various retrospective reinterpretations offered by these offenders for their particular use of a firearm in the commission of a crime. The findings paint a picture of how the offenders act and think in criminal situations.

Before we continue to describe the findings, we need to discuss the general methodological approach by which we carried out the research underlying this book. This will help orient readers to the context in which the details found in the inmates' accounts of guns and violence were obtained. More specifics regarding the methods as well as data collection and analytic procedures may be obtained in the Appendix at the end of this book.

Conducting any form of research in a prison—especially fieldwork—is problematic (Unnithan 1986). This is because the "correctional setting can affect the process of collecting data and the nature and quality of the information gathered" (Unnithan 1986:403). The first obstacle we had to overcome was the small group of correctional managers and state-level administrators who preside over Colorado's prison hierarchy. These high-level bureaucrats at the Colorado Department of Corrections are "gatekeepers" (see Broadhead and Rist 1976) to the prison system. They easily could have prevented us from gaining access to inmates and their prison files. Despite the fact that we had numerous connections to department personnel, and even though the federal government had funded this project through the US Attorney's Office for Colorado, gaining initial access to the prisons was noticeably difficult. The power to determine what prison research was valuable and permissible was the purview of the central office of the Colorado Department of Corrections and it was absolute. Although the executive director supported this project and gave us permission to conduct our research in the prisons, we experienced considerable diffi-

culty in negotiating the bureaucracy of his office to arrange our access to inmates' prison files and to the far-flung research sites. Part of the problem was the complexity in determining who really made the ultimate decisions regarding access. In the end, we gained permission from a public corrections spokesperson to conduct the study after assurances from us that we were not "liberal pukes" as was imputed given our ivory-tower academic backgrounds.

Once we gained permission—and had an authority figure at the Colorado Department of Corrections as a "character reference"—we were able to comb through administrative records and contact each prison directly to set up the interviews. To our surprise, working with individual institutions across the state to arrange interviews with inmates could not have been easier. If the department saw us as a potential threat, this fear certainly was not shared among the local managers and staff of the various prisons we visited except in one case as noted below.

Research Setting

The research for this book was collected from interviews with inmates conducted in 11 different correctional facilities scattered throughout Colorado. Colorado's prison system is typical of most states and consists of 22 public (run by the state) and 7 private (administered by corporations under contract with the state) facilities that hold inmates convicted of various felonies. In 2007, there were approximately 22,424 inmates incarcerated in Colorado prisons. Similar to most states, Colorado has experienced prison population growth despite that fact that crime rates decreased through the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, the number of inmates in Colorado prisons nearly doubled between 1997 and 2007. By the year 2011, Colorado estimates that its prison population will increase to approximately 30,000 inmates. In response, the state has increased its capacity to hold offenders through a prison construction boom. Since 1990, Colorado has built 12 new state-run prisons and contracted for 6 private prisons. The cost of this new prison construction is approximately $83,000 per bed. The state estimates that annual average operating costs will be $27,000 per bed (Colorado Department of Corrections 2004).

The large increase in Colorado's prison population is partially due

to the increase in the number of female inmates. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of women incarcerated in Colorado prisons nearly tripled, from 3,370 to 9,567 inmates (Colorado Department of Corrections 2004). Most women are sent to prison for committing nonviolent crimes. For instance, approximately 76 percent of women incarcerated in Colorado are nonviolent, whereas violent offenses account for 24 percent of all females. This is especially true in the case of murder and robbery where firearms are more likely to be used. There were 23 female murder and robbery commitments in fiscal year 2005 and 20 commitments in fiscal year 2006 (Colorado Department of Corrections 2007). Men, on the other hand, had far more prison commitments for violent crimes than women, and nearly 200 were incarcerated for murder and robbery in fiscal years 2006 and 2007. This meant that the interviews were conducted mainly with male prisoners, though we did have several female prisoners in the sample.

To converse with and interview Colorado's inmates convicted of gun-related violent crimes and to learn about their place within the "gun culture," we traveled hundreds of miles back and forth across the state to visit them in the prisons where they were being held. Many of Colorado's prisons are located in relatively remote rural areas of the state such as Limon, in the vast Eastern Plains and close to the Kansas border; Cañon City, nestled high in the mountains; or Sterling, in the northeast corner of the square state. During the Colorado prison construction boom, rural counties competed for these projects, believing that prisons would bring jobs and economic development to their region (for a description of a similar approach in California, see Gilmore 2006). In our travels, we found some truth to these assertions. There were hotels and fast-food restaurants, many of them relatively new, located adjacent to various prisons. Several locals told us that business picked up during the weekends when families and friends from Denver or Colorado Springs came to meet with their incarcerated loved ones during prison visiting hours.

Due to the severe nature of the offenses we were studying, most of our time was spent talking with inmates located in Colorado's Security Level IV and Level V correction facilities, which are generally the most secure prisons in the state. These facilities became recognizable to us, as we drove toward them, because of the towers, walls, razor wire, and the continuous pickup truck patrols that monitored their perimeters. A few of the interviews, however, were conducted in low-security prisons. After spending a considerable amount

of time interviewing in high-security prisons, doing the same in low-security prisons was a bit unnerving initially. Low-security prisons, often operated by private corporations, allowed us more freedom of movement. We commonly were instructed to find our way to various parts of a particular prison unescorted and, in some cases, unmonitored. In many instances, such trips led to interesting interactions and conversations with various prison staff members and inmates that we encountered. For example, private prison staff sometimes lamented their low pay and relative lack of benefits, contrasting them with the better salaries and benefits accorded to their peers at institutions run by the state.

We interviewed inmates at Colorado Department of Corrections facilities across the state that held inmates convicted of violent gun crimes (Security Levels II through V). The complexes that we visited for this project included Arkansas Valley, Bent, Buena Vista, Crowley County, East Complex, Limon, Sterling, Territorial, Trinidad, and Women's. Some of these complexes are the site of more than one prison facility. For example, the East Complex holds Arrowhead, Centennial, Colorado State Penitentiaries, Four Mile, and Fremont. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, if not absolute anonymity, we do not link the interviews with specific institutions.

For the most part, our introductory routines at each facility that we visited were similar and relatively uncomplicated. We notified the warden, appropriate prison staff, and inmates prior to our arrival at the prison to conduct the interviews. In most cases, the prison administration was able to accommodate our requests. In a few instances, however, the interview dates had to be changed to take into account prison-wide lockdowns or a warden who wanted to talk with us prior to the interviews, but was unavailable on the dates requested. Usually, the warden made arrangements to greet us as soon as we arrived at a prison. Our interactions with prison staff were generally pleasant and it was common for us to know at least one prison guard or staff member in each of the prisons that we visited. A few were former students who fortunately remembered their days on our respective campuses with affection. Indeed, we were often told by prison staff that they enjoyed having us visit their facility and wished that there were more such partnerships between researchers and prisons. In several instances, we were invited to dine in the prison cafeteria with the staff. Such meals provided us with time to talk with staff members about the prison and their experiences working in these institutions.

It is interesting to note that, although we originally thought that prison staff and administrators would be suspicious of our motivations for wanting to talk with their prisoners, we encountered outright hostility by only one such individual: a prison administrator who had complained loudly about academic researchers. In the first case, this administrator monitored us constantly during our visit. At one point, she interrupted an interview to take away a soda that the interviewer had purchased for the inmate. This put the interviewer in the awkward position of having to save face by sticking up for the inmate for fear of losing valuable information and jeopardizing future interviews in that institution. Although these types of experiences are uncomfortable, they are not unusual for deviance researchers. Accepting a stigma by association (or courtesy stigma) is often used to help establish rapport with subjects and improve the quality of the information we gather (Anderson and Calhoun 1992; Goffman 1963). In another instance, the same administrator disciplined a correctional officer directly in front of an interviewer for allowing an interview to be conducted with an inmate who was supposed to be in administrative segregation. Again, the interviewers were forced to intervene by claiming that they had misunderstood the rules about who could and could not be interviewed.

The interviews with inmates were conducted within the prison walls in private conference rooms, staff offices, or visitation rooms (when they were not being used). Before we entered these settings, we were required to undergo searches for any items that we may have been carrying that could be considered contraband under institutional rules. We were allowed to carry pens, pencils, paper, and tape recorders into the prison—all of which had to be accounted for before we left. In one instance, an interviewer tossed a few used tape recorder batteries in the trash can in a visitation room and was detained at the front gate for some time until the batteries could be searched for and recovered.

Sample of Violent Gun Offenders

We selected the inmates we interviewed for this study with the help of the Colorado Department of Corrections (see the Appendix at the back of the book). As we discovered, many of the interviewees had experienced previous encounters with law enforcement. For example, over

two-thirds of all inmates we spoke with (77 percent) reported that they had been arrested for a felony at least once prior to their current criminal offense. Their prison files confirmed this information. In addition, nearly one-third (32.9 percent) had been incarcerated for a felony in the past. Most inmates had extensive experience with guns. Nearly 60 percent admitted to having used a gun in the past for legitimate or criminal purposes. Many who did not admit to past gun use had what they described as extended current involvement (i.e., several armed robberies). Finally, we discovered that nearly one-third (32.9 percent) of the sample had been affiliated with street gangs at some point in the past. Many of these gang members were incarcerated in the mid- to late 1990s when violent crime in Colorado was decreasing, but gang violence was viewed as a serious problem.

For the most part, the offenders we talked with used a variety of guns in the handgun category. Indeed, 94.6 percent of inmates reported that they had selected a handgun for their most recent offense. And nearly 50 percent of those inmates used .38- and .25-caliber handguns. Moreover, approximately one-half of the interviewees used what they described as semiautomatic weapons while the other half used revolvers. Despite claims that criminals are becoming "superarmed," we found little evidence that they had advanced weaponry of any sort (Johnson 2007).

We were surprised to learn that many of the inmates had held legitimate jobs that ranged from employment in the service sector (e.g., fast-food cook, cashier, and sales) to blue-collar work as mechanics, manufacturing workers, and welders to more white-collar jobs in administration. Some, though few, admitted to us that their main source of income was crime related (i.e., drug sales and robberies). We also were surprised to learn that nearly one-third of the subjects had children who they could claim as dependents. Moreover, in many instances, they kept in touch with the children on a regular basis.

The background characteristics of the Colorado gun offenders who we interviewed suggest that they are not that different from inmates incarcerated for gun offenses in other states. Thus, these inmates' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions are likely to be similar to inmates in other states.

We began each interview with a brief explanation about how inmates were selected for the study and the types of topics that we might discuss. We told inmates that their participation in this research project was entirely voluntary and that they were under no obligation

to answer any of our inquiries. We informed them that, if they felt uncomfortable with any of the topics of discussion, they could simply tell us that and we would proceed to other topics and related inquiries. Moreover, we clearly stated that inmates could end the interview whenever they wished. Throughout the interview process, we made every effort to ensure that inmates understood that our conversations were both voluntary and confidential. We told each inmate that no one except us would be able to identify their answers and that any information they provided to us would be used only for research purposes. Finally, we emphasized that we did not want any details, if any, that might compromise an inmate's pending legal case. It is important to point out that we did discover—through our conversations with interviewees—that inmates who met our criteria but refused to be interviewed were mainly concerned with potential legal repercussions. And in one case, an interviewer was told that an inmate who recently had been incarcerated for the first time was just "too scared" to talk with him. Still, we have good reason to believe that most of the inmates we interviewed were surprisingly open and honest about their past behavior. Again, we are confident in the validity of the data because inmates often gave answers that closely matched information that was available and recorded in their prison file. Lastly, we should point out that a few inmates who felt uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning asked the interviewer to momentarily turn off the tape recorder so that their responses would not be recorded. These brief unrecorded conversations often were focused on a particular aspect of that inmate's crime and were largely inconsequential to the current research questions. A small number of inmates did not allow us to tape any part of their interviews. However, the majority of inmates seemed eager to talk to us despite the presence of the tape recorder.

Inmate interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, though some interviews ran a little longer. Because this study was cross-sectional in nature, inmates were interviewed at different points in their sentences. Thus, similar to many criminological studies, we often drew on cross-sectional data to simulate longitudinal results (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1990). Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews with inmates. Interviews were organized around a list of topics that covered a variety of issues surrounding gun use and violence. Responses to interviewers' inquiries were open ended and inmates could freely relate their responses. The issues we dis-

cussed during the conversations with inmates relied heavily on our own interpersonal interview styles (Fontana and Frey 1994; Minichiello et al. 1995). Thus, although we had topics to cover, no questions or probes were strictly predetermined, sequenced, or standardized. Instead, we allowed the inmate to control the flow of conversation on each topic while casually inquiring about guns as and where appropriate. There are many benefits of this type of information gathering. Specifically, the greater degree of informality involved led to a stronger rapport between the inmate and interviewer. Further, inmates were allowed to express themselves in ways that are natural to them (Burns 2000) as opposed to being led, prepared, or directed by the interviewer.

We asked the interviewees general issues about their family, schools, peer group, neighborhood, prior contact with the criminal justice system, and experiences with firearms. Inmates were also asked about a series of events surrounding the circumstances that led up to the crime for which they were currently incarcerated. It was from this vantage point that we began to see the importance of gangs and prison socialization in influencing the interviewees' perceptions about guns. When details we were interested in were left out of the conversation, we often used the information gleaned from the interviewee's prison file as a probe to initiate dialogue on those subjects. In most cases, the interviewee's knowledge that we had information from the file in our possession appeared to move the discussions forward rather than shutting them down.

We chose to introduce each inmate in the sample to readers in Table 1.1 so that they can get a sense of the inmate's background as they read the book. Table 1.1 displays general information about the inmates, including their pseudonym (to ensure that they cannot be identified), crime, gang status, and general demographics. The table also notes various differences such as gang membership. As the table demonstrates, the median age of the 24 gang members in the sample is 25, though their age at the time they committed their violent crime was considerably younger. Thirteen of those gang members are black, five are white, two are Asian, and four are Hispanic. Seven of the gang members we interviewed were convicted of murder or non-negligent manslaughter, six were convicted of attempted murder, two were convicted of robbery, seven were convicted of assault, and two were convicted of kidnapping. At the time of the interviews, the inmates had been incarcerated for an average of 4.7 years. All but two

Table 1.1 List of Interviewed Inmates by Crime, Gun Use, Gang Membership, and Demographics (*n* = 73; mean age = 32.93)

Tape	Pseudonym	Current Crime	Gun Used in Current Crime	Age When Interviewed	Sex	Race	Street Gang Member	Arrested in Prior Offense	Previous Prison Sentence	Previous Gun Experience/ Use (Self-Admit)
1	Isaiah	Robbery	Handgun	25	Male	White	No	No	No	No
2	Ernesto	Robbery	Handgun	28	Male	Hispanic	No	Yes	No	No
3	Edwin	Homicide	Handgun	53	Male	White	No	No	No	Yes
4	Claude	Other	Handgun	32	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	No	No
5	Charles	Assault	Handgun	55	Male	Black	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Elton	Robbery	Handgun	32	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	Yes
7	Jan	Homicide	Handgun	26	Male	Hispanic	No	Yes	No	Yes
8	Willian	Other	Handgun	38	Male	White	No	Yes	No	Yes
9	Reinaldo	Kidnapping	Handgun	23	Male	Hispanic	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Bob	Robbery	Handgun	43	Male	Hispanic	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	Damon	Other	Handgun	43	Male	Hispanic	No	No	No	No
12	David	Other	Handgun	33	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
13	Johnathan	Assault	Shotgun	36	Male	White	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
14	Russ	Homicide	Handgun	43	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	Yes

15	Len	Homicide	Handgun	30	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	Yes
16	Zack	Robbery	Handgun	35	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	Yes
17	Tim	Assault	Handgun	38	Male	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
18	Antwan	Other	Handgun	32	Male	White	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
19	Chance	Robbery	Handgun	35	Male	Black	No	No	No	No
20	Jerry	Homicide	Handgun	27	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	Yes
21	Stephen	Homicide	Handgun	51	Male	Other	No	No	No	No
22	Mike	Homicide	Handgun	25	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
23	Miquel	Assault	Handgun	23	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	No	No
24	Marc	Homicide	Handgun	55	Male	White	No	No	No	No
25	Darrel	Homicide	Handgun	28	Male	White	No	Yes	No	No
26	Orval	Other	Handgun	28	Male	Hispanic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
27	Charlie	Kidnapping	Handgun	21	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
28	Logan	Homicide	Handgun	28	Male	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
29	Hollis	Homicide	Handgun	67	Male	White	No	Yes	Yes	No
30	Windord	Assault	Handgun	43	Male	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
31	Trent	Homicide	Handgun	33	Male	Black	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
32	Langley	Assault	Handgun	21	Male	White	No	Yes	No	Yes
33	Sidney	Homicide	Handgun	32	Male	Black	Yes	No	No	Yes
34	Casey	Robbery	Handgun	28	Male	White	No	No	No	No
35	Ricardo	Homicide	Handgun	21	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	No	No
36	Jack	Other	Handgun	35	Male	Hispanic	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
37	Giselle	Other	Handgun	26	Female	Hispanic	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

continues

Table 1.1 continued

Tape	Pseudonym	Current Crime	Gun Used in Current Crime	Age When Interviewed	Sex	Race	Street Gang Member	Arrested in Prior Offense	Previous Prison Sentence	Previous Gun Experience/ Use (Self-Admit)
38	Tiffiny	Homicide	Handgun	24	Female	White	No	No	No	No
39	Vicky	Robbery	Handgun	20	Female	Black	No	Yes	No	No
40	Maryland	Robbery	Handgun	26	Female	Black	Yes	No	No	Yes
41	Sandy	Homicide	Handgun	33	Female	Black	No	No	No	No
42	Donald	Homicide	Handgun	33	Male	Black	No	No	No	Yes
43	Baxter	Robbery	Handgun	50	Male	White	No	Yes	Yes	No
44	Newton	Homicide	Handgun	38	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
45	Renato	Homicide	Handgun	60	Male	White	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
46	Elbert	Other	Handgun	43	Male	Hispanic	No	Yes	No	No
47	Rodney	Robbery	Handgun	21	Male	White	No	Yes	No	Yes
48	Francesco	Homicide	Handgun	27	Male	White	No	No	No	No
49	Mark	Other	Handgun	20	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
50	Cleveland	Robbery	Handgun	21	Male	White	No	Yes	No	No
51	Gerry	Assault	Handgun	23	Male	White	Yes	Yes	No	No
52	Pete	Assault	Handgun	29	Male	Hispanic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

53	Clifford	Robbery	Handgun	50	Male	White	No	Yes	No	Yes
54	Ken	Other	Handgun	25	Male	White	No	Yes	No	Yes
55	Kent	Homicide	Rifle	28	Male	Hispanic	No	Yes	Yes	No
56	Paul	Homicide	Handgun	21	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	No
57	Wiley	Assault	Handgun	22	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
58	Arturo	Kidnapping	Handgun	20	Male	Other	Yes	No	No	No
59	Thad	Robbery	Handgun	33	Male	Black	No	No	Yes	Yes
60	Beau	Robbery	Handgun	24	Male	White	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
61	Trey	Homicide	Handgun	23	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	No	No
62	Preston	Assault	Shotgun	23	Male	White	No	Yes	No	No
63	Matthew	Homicide	Handgun	42	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	Yes
64	Lance	Robbery	Handgun	56	Male	White	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
65	Dan	Homicide	Handgun	21	Male	Other	Yes	Yes	No	No
66	Wade	Homicide	Handgun	27	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	No
67	Frederic	Assault	Handgun	25	Male	Black	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
68	Carlo	Homicide	Rifle	38	Male	White	No	Yes	No	No
69	Doug	Other	Handgun	32	Male	White	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
70	Reed	Homicide	Handgun	64	Male	White	No	No	No	No
71	Eloy	Other	Handgun	21	Male	Hispanic	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
72	Sam	Homicide	Handgun	50	Male	Black	No	Yes	No	No
73	Brandee	Robbery	Handgun	19	Female	White	No	No	No	No

in the sample of gang members are male, and all of the gang members used a handgun in the commission of the crime for which they are currently incarcerated.

Approach

Qualitative research has clearly witnessed a resurgence in popularity over the past decade in all of the various social sciences (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Hess-Biber and Leavy 2008). More recently, there has been an increase in the literature that encourages and promotes qualitative research techniques to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social problems, such as gun use, and their various manifestations. Denzin and Lincoln offer their perspective as to why qualitative methods have become more pervasive of late.

> In more than two decades a quiet methodological revolution has been taking place in the social sciences. A blurring of disciplinary boundaries has occurred. The social sciences and humanities have drawn closer together in mutual focus on an interpretive, qualitative approach to research and theory. Although these trends are not new, the extent to which the qualitative revolution has overtaken the social sciences and related professional fields has been nothing short of amazing. (1998:vii)

The reason for the qualitative approach in this work is, of course, to present in-depth knowledge necessary to portray the inmates' perspectives about guns through their social locations as they experience them (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Pogrebin 2003). Thus, the strength of this work stems from its inductive approach and emphasis on specific situations, and the utilization of language rather than numerical explanations (Maxwell 1996). This research stresses interpretive, ethnographic methods that provide for insightful and contextual knowledge at close range (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). Therefore, we focus on the narrative accounts of inmates to explain their gun use. The use of narrative accounts is a strategic method by which we ask the interviewees to relate their violent past. Narrative analysis is often described as a successful approach that can be used to study controversial and difficult topics (Migliaccio 2002). A narrative format can provide rich and detailed data, which may lead to insights into the connections between one's life experiences and social envi-

ronment (Pierce 2003). Narrative analysis, notes Pierce, explains how people strategize and act within the context of their past interpersonal experiences. Relating stories through narratives is a type of social interaction where the primary purpose is to construct and communicate meaning. Chase argues that such a forum "draws on and is constrained by the culture by which it is embedded" (1995:7). Walzer and Oles (2003) point out that explanations may reflect attempts to maintain face to convince the audience that we are okay by framing our actions in terms of what we perceive to be acceptable. The advantage of this approach in our research is that, once we had established rapport with the interviewees, the lengthy interviews gave them the opportunity and conversational latitude needed to discuss their ideas and perceptions about guns.

The interview tapes were transcribed for qualitative data analysis, which involves scanning and identifying general statements about relationships among categories of observations. We looked for explanations concerning inmates' perceptions about the importance of guns as Schatzman and Strauss (1973) suggest.

Hobbs and May (1993) contend that in-depth interviews are the best way to gather data that could never be obtained by only observing the activities of people. Given the fact that intensive interviews are often part of participant observation, we argue that they are sufficient to make conclusions regarding accounts of behavior, perceptions of guns and gun laws, and gang socialization. It is to these tasks that we now turn.

Organization of the Book

In Chapter 2, we examine why the inmates we interviewed say they used guns in the commission of their offenses. Through our conversations with the inmates, we discovered that offenders are able to utilize a repertoire of accounts to explain their gun violence. As readers will note, the inmates frequently utilize both fact and fantasy when explaining why they used guns. We discovered that most inmates explain their gun use through what Scott and Lyman (1968) famously term "justifications" and "excuses." Our experiences with gun-using inmates suggest that these accounts were effective in preserving their conventional sense of self, self-concept, or identity. In fact, it often was not until we read through the transcripts of the interviews that we

realized how untoward and socially unacceptable many acts narrated by a given inmate actually were.

This is not to say that we were "fooled" by inmates' descriptions of events since we had prior access to their prison files and all of the life history and criminal event information contained therein. More specifically, we placed each interviewee's summary "rap sheet" on the table where we conducted our conversations in a way that was visible to the interviewee. Even though the files provided us with an adequate picture of each inmate before the interviews and, given the physical presence of the rap sheet, the inmate was aware that we knew about his or her previous history, there nevertheless was some vagueness and ambiguity in each file that allowed the inmate some conversational space to locate his or her conventional self. Our jobs, as interviewers, were to allow these types of interactions and to permit the inmates to put their best face forward during the interviews. Thus, we were engaged in their explanations of events and were outwardly accepting of their excuses and justifications. In parallel with such seeming acceptance, we probed them actively, extensively, and, when indicated, rather skeptically for more details about guns in the crimes they had committed and in their everyday lives.

In Chapter 3, we investigate the potential role of guns in producing and reproducing violent norms in street gang cultures. Many of the inmates we interviewed came from social and cultural locations that increased the probability of their joining and participating in a street gang. Although some inmates were in a gang and some were not, we did notice that gang members' experiences and perceptions of guns were quite different from the inmates who were raised in non-gang neighborhoods and settings. Moreover, inmates enmeshed in the street gang culture told us that the gun was a potent symbol of power and a ready remedy for all manner of conflicts and disputes.

These explanations remind us of a large amount of recent work in criminology suggesting that an individual's reputation is extremely important and that violence is one major way to project a tough reputation. We believe that guns serve as symbols and tools that may help project, establish, and maintain such a reputation. Thus, we focus on the issue of gang socialization and the central role that guns play in that process. We believe that American society may have underestimated the extent to which guns influence gang socialization and therefore also the symbolic impact of guns on violent behavior and individual identities in such contexts.

In Chapter 4, we explore inmate perceptions about the reasons that other people in society carry guns. Although most other people say that they carry guns for self-protection, power, or both, during the interviews we began to notice that inmates' accounts varied according to the number of years they had been imprisoned. This finding, grounded in the conversations with inmates, is interesting to us because it suggests that incarceration can change an inmate's views about guns. Even as the issues of prison socialization and its consequences have been debated for some time in the sociological literature, we believe that prisons may increase rather than decrease the probability that former inmates will use guns after their release from incarceration. Just as the interviewees were socialized on the street, they also have been socialized during their time in the prison. This latter socialization process is important if we wish to understand why inmates may leave prison only to revert to using guns again in the future.

In Chapter 5, we examine the interviewees' attitudes regarding gun laws. Many inmates brought up the issue of Colorado's gun laws during their interviews and wanted us to know how they felt about those laws. In Colorado, gun legislation and associated policies are designed by politicians in the state legislature who pay close attention to their constituents' views about firearms. One recently popular form of gun policy in a majority of states consists of the so-called shall-issue laws for carrying concealed weapons. Colorado had debated just such a law in Senate Bill 03-024 of 2003 (since enacted into law as Section 18-12-2 of the Colorado Revised Statutes).

Moreover, though issues pertaining to the freedom and regulation surrounding the possession and use of firearms have always been controversial in the United States (Utter 2000; Wilson 2006), few researchers have asked inmates who have used guns in the commission of a violent crime about their views of shall-issue policies. Of course, though we cannot claim that the inmates we talked with were truthful about what they said they would do "on the street" in response to shall-issue gun laws, we did find that inmates hold both positive and negative views of Colorado's gun policy. Rather alarmingly, the majority of inmates told us they would act more aggressively if they knew that others with whom they interacted were likely to be carrying concealed weapons. A minority of inmates said they would act less aggressively in similar situations.

This chapter has provided an overview of the topics and issues that we will discuss in the four substantive chapters that follow.

Chapter 6, our final chapter, brings together the major conclusions of the various substantive chapters. In it, we also seek to answer several additional questions regarding the place of guns in the commission of criminal violence and, more generally, in relation to criminal behavior. Conclusions from our overall research project and their theoretical and methodological implications are presented along with suggestions for future research.