

Armed and Considered Dangerous: A Survey of Felons and Their Firearms.

By James D. Wright and Peter H. Rossi. *Aldine de Gruyter*. 247 pp. Cloth, \$36.95; paper, \$14.95.

Reviewer: GARY KLECK, *Florida State University*

This book's subject is "how, where and why criminals acquire, carry and use firearms" and it provides more information on the topic than all previous sources combined. While there has been survey information available on ownership of guns among the general, noncriminal population, data on criminals' guns were largely limited to what little could be gleaned from records of the guns confiscated by police. Wright and Rossi have "gone to the horse's mouth" and asked a large sample of known criminals about their guns.

The researchers distributed a self-administered, 75-page questionnaire to male felons serving time in 11 medium-to-maximum security prisons in 10 states, obtaining 1,874 usable questionnaires. The choice of research sites was dictated not by probability sampling considerations but by the researchers' many travails in gaining access to prisons. It appears to be considerably harder for researchers to get into prisons than it is for criminals. To gain access to one prison the field staff had to sign an agreement stating that if they were taken hostage, prison officials were not obliged to negotiate for their release!

The authors take pains to explain the significance of this and other problems with their work. Their sample is one of self-selected prisoners in facilities whose administrators were cooperative. A modest test for self-selection found no evidence that participants differed from nonparticipants. However, the results cannot be generalized to juveniles or to the sort of infrequent or less serious offenders who are unlikely to be found in prisons.

A second major problem the authors note is response bias. The responses of some felons may have been self-serving, careless, or deliberately misleading. For each question where this is likely to be a problem, Wright and Rossi consider how hard-core felons might distort their responses, often noting, however, that their conclusions would be even stronger if possible response bias were eliminated. For example, if one assumes felons want to project a tough image, it is all the more noteworthy when they admit to having been "scared off" from committing a crime by an armed victim, or say they refrained from carrying guns because they were afraid they might hurt their victims.

With these caveats in mind, here are some of the findings.

A third of the felons said they worried regularly or often about the possibility of being shot at by their victims, 56 percent agreed that criminals will avoid victims they know to be armed, and 74 percent agreed that one reason burglars avoid occupied houses is because they fear being shot. As for actual experiences, 37 percent had run into armed victims; 34 percent had been scared off, shot at, wounded or captured by an armed victim; and 39 percent had at some time in the past decided not to commit a crime because they believed that the victim was carrying a gun.

Gun criminals usually use handguns in their crimes, but over 80 percent of those in the sample said they would switch to sawed-off versions of the more deadly long-guns (rifles and shotguns) if handguns were not available to them. Among felons who used guns regularly in crime, 70 percent had already personally sawed off a rifle or shotgun. Likewise, if denied access to small cheap handguns, better than 80 percent would switch to bigger, deadlier handguns or to long-guns.

These felons' main sources of guns were friends, relatives, and acquaintances, and their most common method of acquisition was purchase. Thus they did not usually get guns either by the completely legal route of retail purchase from a store or the completely criminal route of theft, but rather by quasi-legal, low-visibility, private transfers largely beyond the current limits of legal regulation.

While criminals do often steal guns, they rarely go out looking for guns to steal and rarely need to steal in order to arm themselves. They usually sell the guns they happen across in the course of property crimes, occasionally keeping an especially nice gun, better than those they already have. Theft is thus more of a means of technological upgrading than a way of becoming armed.

These felons possessed and carried guns as much to help in surviving "life on the streets" as to use in committing crimes. Most originally acquired guns for protection rather than for crime.

This book is recommended reading for anyone interested in criminal violence, containing much that is of interest beyond issues of weaponry. However, it is essential reading for those interested in the significance of weaponry to crime and in the issue of gun control. Its findings should be sobering to those who regard gun control as an easy "technological" solution to violence in America, but they are also critical to making the hard choices and subtle judgments needed to craft gun-control policies that will do more good than harm.

Alcohol Interventions: Historical and Sociocultural Approaches.

Edited by David S. Strug, S. Priyadarsini, and Merton M. Hyman. Haworth. 210 pp. Cloth, \$29.95; paper, \$19.95.

Reviewer: DAN MC MURRY, Middle Tennessee State University

There is something quietly unsettling about this book. Even though the editors assembled some of the leading names in the field of alcohol studies for contributors—Keller, Milgram, Rubington, Lender—the focus is wrong. With scholars like that there should have been excitement, not echoing quietness. After reading the book a second time, I decided that the feeling came from studying topics generally thought to be "ancient history" in the field of alcoholism. The long backward glances of Milgram and of Keller (in his case over 50 years) add a flavor of academic nostalgia. If the editors intended the title to represent the goal of the book—that is, a review of recent "alcohol interventions"—then it is a backward look with one eye closed. The book misleads rather than fills a gap.