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# Kids and Assault Weapons: Social Problem or Social Construction?

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The sunset of the federal assault weapons ban in September 2004 increased the political and scholarly debate about the criminal use of such firearms. Some of the debate is alarmist, suggesting that juveniles have easy access to these firearms and are likely to use them in violent offenses. These perspectives are reinforced on television and in films and contribute to perceptions about the sophistication of weapons that juveniles possess, as well as to the punishments that juveniles should face. This study examines firearms recovered from juvenile offenders in both national and city samples from 1992 to 2000 and finds that assault weapons are seldom used or possessed by juveniles. Our findings suggest that the disjuncture between popular perceptions and the reality of juvenile gun use has been socially constructed by four different groups: the police, news and entertainment organizations, interest groups, and juveniles themselves.

**Keywords:** *juvenile gun use; assault weapons; social construction*

Bernard (1992) observed that the United States has experienced cycles of juvenile crime crises for over 200 years. The image of a persistent juvenile crime problem is shaped by politicians, law enforcement, and the entertainment industry in large part through the use of media images and news reports. These groups all profit by labeling youths as violence-prone offenders and portraying juvenile crime as rising. In response to this crisis, law enforcement agencies expanded their personnel and budgets, politicians were elected on crime control platforms, and the entertainment industry sold the public films, television programs, or music videos that graphically depicted the escalation of urban youth violence. Last, a number of scholars have attracted national attention through their dire warnings about potential juvenile predators, including “the young and the ruthless” (Fox, 1992) or “super-predators” (Bennett, Dilulio, & Walters, 1996).

Many perceptions about juveniles and their propensity for violence stem from reports from news organizations about the seriousness of the youth crime problem, even though rates of violent crime—including youth violence—have been decreasing (Catalano, 2004; Cole,

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1999; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004; Zimring, 2000). Two issues about juvenile crime are inextricably linked: the pervasiveness and seriousness of juvenile gangs (McCorkle & Miethe, 2002) and the sophisticated firearms that these juveniles are reputed to possess (Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995; Sheley & Wright, 1993; Zimring, 1989). Although juveniles made substantial contributions to the escalation of homicide rates within the United States during the 1980s and 1990s (Blumstein, 1995), it is not clear whether the types of firearms used by juveniles in these violent encounters correspond to the public image of the weapons involved.

The public view about the types of weapons that a juvenile would be likely to use in a crime is largely a consequence of media images—in news reports and the entertainment industry—that emphasize the use of military-style assault weapons (AW) such as the AK-47<sup>1</sup> or fully automatic firearms such as the Uzi that are able to fire an entire 30-round magazine with a single pull of the trigger. Although a host of different definitions has been used to describe AW, the federal government's definition is a semiautomatic firearm (that requires the user to pull the trigger for every shot) that has a detachable magazine and has at least two of the following military-style features: a folding or telescoping stock, pistol grip, bayonet mount, flash suppressor, or grenade launcher. Typically, these firearms are chambered for powerful center fire cartridges.

Certainly, these types of firearms represent a substantial increase in firepower contrasted against the single-shot homemade "zip guns"<sup>2</sup> or less powerful "Saturday night specials" (SNS)<sup>3</sup> that their counterparts in the 1950s or 1960s were likely to possess. Although these perceptions may be supported in the latest film, music video, or television program, we argue that they are inaccurate. This position is supported by the work of Perrone and Chesney-Lind (1997). Perrone and Chesney-Lind argue that media accounts of youth violence, weaponry, and gangs are greatly exaggerated. Indeed, they note the tendency of the media and public policy groups to overreport levels of youth crime.

This study examines one part of the juvenile crime problem, the unlawful possession of AW by juveniles. Based on the data, we raise questions about whether the sophistication of juvenile firearms has been accurately depicted by news organizations, the entertainment industry, interest groups, politicians, and the police. By better understanding the types of firearms that youths are likely to possess, it might make us reconsider—or at least consider—how entertainment industries, the police, interest groups, and politicians shape our perceptions about juvenile offenders. It is also plausible that the depiction of AW in films or television might itself contribute to a "juvenile arms race" if youths perceive that their rivals have access to more sophisticated firearms and therefore are more motivated to obtain similar guns so they won't be "outgunned" (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

In addition to extending the empirical literature about juvenile gun use, our goal is to inform the public policy debate about firearms and juvenile crime and help separate the rhetoric from the reality about firearms use. In their study of the effect of the 1994 AW ban, Roth and Koper (1999) concluded that "gun control policies . . . are highly controversial crime control measures, and the debates tend to be dominated by anecdotes and emotion rather than empirical findings" (p. 10). We feel that it is important that policy development and law enforcement practices be driven by what the research demonstrates about juvenile AW use, an area with little prior empirical work.

## **Sources of Misperceptions About Juveniles and Assault Weapons**

There is a long tradition of scholarly work that seeks to explain the methods and mechanisms individuals use to understand the world. We interpret and give meaning to our surroundings through a variety of sources, including independent observation, our interrelationships with others, and from external sources. The phenomenological perspective proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) argues that three distinct social processes are involved, including the construction of ideas (externalization), shifts in our objective reality to understand these impressions (objectivation), and when people are exposed to these agreed-on "facts" through socialization (internalization). In some cases, political stakeholders have a vested interest in manipulating these shared definitions. As Beckett and Sasson (2000) observe, "Our understanding of the significance of crime as a social problem and our views on its causes and cures depend largely on the way in which the issue is represented" (p. 6).

Many scholars have argued that either news organizations or the government are often responsible for the construction of myths about issues of crime or justice (Beckett & Sasson, 2000; Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 2000). Kappeler et al. (2000) suggest that the creation of these myths is functional for the objectives of these organizations. Yet, there are two additional groups that have contributed to the public's misperceptions about juveniles and AW. The third group is juveniles themselves, who may exaggerate their experiences with firearms to bolster their self-importance. Last, academic researchers, government agencies, and interest groups often categorize adults up to 24 years of age as youth or juveniles, which may mislead the consumers of these studies. Together, these four factions all contribute to our misperceptions about the juvenile AW problem.

All four of the groups above have used the issue of AW to bolster their revenues, expand their agencies, increase their agendas, or in the case of youths, enhance their own importance. Whereas the entertainment industry, interest groups, and government agencies have benefited from these assessments, these inaccurate perceptions have actually harmed juveniles, by making these youths appear more sophisticated than they actually are and contributing to tougher sanctions for juvenile offenders. The following paragraphs outline how these different stakeholders have used the juvenile AW problem for their own benefit.

### **Law Enforcement Misperceptions About Assault Weapons**

By demonstrating an expansion in crime, government agencies can successfully argue for increasing the size and scope of their agencies (Kappeler et al., 2000), contributing to a 485% increase in funding to the police, courts, and corrections from 1977 to 2001 (Bauer & Owens, 2004).<sup>4</sup> McCorkle and Miethe (2002), for example, argue that many police departments increased the size of their gang units in response to a gang problem that may have been overstated in some jurisdictions. From a similar perspective, police agencies and district attorneys may benefit from portraying juveniles as having more sophisticated firearms than they actually possess. Police reports of AW use, for instance, are often anecdotal and are often in response to a single incident. In fact, even when studies of crime-involved firearms are reported, AW generally are not classified as a separate category of firearms. The few studies that have examined AW use generally have found that AW represent a minuscule portion of

all firearms recovered by offenders (Kopel, 1994; Koper & Roth, 2001, 2002; Roth & Koper, 1999; Ruddell & Mays, 2003).

Police spokespersons might also use these images of AW to depict the problems of violent juvenile crime,

The sophistication of the weapons utilized by gang members is constantly increasing. . . . Assault weapons like the UZI are becoming more and more common. . . . These assault weapons are being used not only in gang versus gang confrontations, but also against law enforcement officers. (Sergeant Joseph Guzman, L.A. County Sheriff's Department, cited in Stallworth, 1995)

In another example, reported by Kleck (2001), a federal law enforcement official (Edward Conroy, Miami Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms [ATF/BATF]) describes the use of fully automatic firearms by drug gangsters:

South Florida is the Mecca of illegal automatics and machine-gun hits and accidental killings of innocent bystanders in drug shootouts are almost commonplace. . . . There are even brazen attacks at stoplights, with grandma and the kiddies getting greased along with the target. (p. 198)

Although the perceptions of these officers may be swayed by an individual incident, there is no evidence to suggest that such offenses are more than isolated events. A recent national study of assault weapons reveals that they are rarely used in any offense—even before the 1994 restrictions on these firearms (Roth & Koper, 1999). Kopel (1994) also found that AW were rarely recovered by police or encountered in violent crime. In the Miami example outlined above, Kleck (2001) reports that during the year when Special Agent Conroy's statement was made, fully automatic weapons had been used in less than 1% of all offenses, and there was no evidence that any innocent bystander was ever killed in the crossfire.

A number of politicians also have portrayed the use of assault weapons as epidemic in either juvenile or gang populations—characteristics that tend to be used interchangeably,

Warning of a new wave of violence among "grievance killers, gang bangers and juveniles" if a federal ban on certain assault weapons is allowed to expire, the bill's author called on President Bush and Congressional Republicans to allow the ban to be renewed or face political backlash otherwise. (Fouhy, 2004, Associated Press, describing Senator Diane Feinstein's remarks)

As more and more assault weapons are confiscated from crime scenes, fewer and fewer criminals and juveniles will have access to these deadly killing machines. (Brady Campaign, 2004, in response to the question whether the AW ban has reduced the use of AW in crime)

Assault weapons have become the weapons of choice for violent criminals, drug dealers, gangs and dangerous maniacs everywhere. They have been used on schoolyards, at airports, in bank lobbies, on trains, in traffic, and in front of the White House. (Reno, 1996)

If the ban dies, AK-47s, Uzis and Tec-9 pistols will again be legal to sell in the United States, and gun dealers expect a brisk business in what have been the weapons of choice for street gangs, drug traffickers and terrorists. (Atlanta Constitution Staff, 2004)

The men and women who protect us are aware of the devastating firepower of these guns, the damage they cause in our communities and the attraction of these rapid killing machines to criminal gangs, drug dealers and individuals intent on mass murder. (Pelosi, 2004)

It is unknown, however, whether these accounts are gleaned from official reports of isolated incidents, misleading interpretations of these incidents from news organizations, or from fictional accounts portrayed on television or in films.

### **Media Images of Assault Weapons**

Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) observe that “we walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues” (p. 373). The visual use of AW in television news reports is an example of how news organizations can mislead us about the prevalence of these weapons. News reports in the first author’s community in Northern California about intentional and unintentional shootings have often featured the silhouette of an AK-47 rifle, with its distinctive “banana shaped” clip and short barrel as a visual backdrop for the news anchor. This image is depicted regardless of what type of firearm is actually used in the accident or assault. Such images contribute to the public’s misunderstanding of the types of firearms that are in circulation—although we are not aware whether this is an isolated practice, or such images are commonly used by other news organizations.

The Violence Policy Center (VPC) and the National Rifle Association (NRA) occupy polar opposite political positions with regard to the legislative control of firearms. Yet, both interest groups acknowledge that AW are frequently shown on television and films. Whereas the VPC (2003) suggests that these depictions of firearms actually create demand for these types of guns, the NRA (2003) observes how “Americans were fed a daily diet of trendy drug dealers all sporting UZIs and AK-47s. It was a fiction that created the notion that these guns were actually used by violent criminals” (p. 2).

To evaluate the claims of both the NRA and the VPC, we conducted a search of current song titles on the launchcast music service offered by [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com). Using the search terms “AK-47,” “UZI,” “M-16,” “MAC 10,” “Streetsweepers,” and “Tec-9” (all names of AW), we found that 82 current songs had assault-type firearms in their titles, and two entire albums featured AW in their titles. Moreover, a number of recording artists incorporated AW into the names of their groups, such as “Tec-9” and “MAC and AK.” The titles of these 82 songs varied, but all included references to AW. In addition to song titles, firearms are also depicted in song lyrics and visually represented in music videos. Many of these songs are associated with “gangsta” rap, which typically depicts life in inner-city America and is popular with Black and White youngsters and adolescents. Armstrong (2001) found that almost one quarter of the 490 songs that he analyzed included violent themes, and he speculated that as time passed, this violent content has increased (p. 8).

The fact that artists were able to record 82 songs that feature AW in their titles suggests that there is an economic market for audio and visual representations of AW. Further, these only include songs with firearms named in the title and do not include those that make reference to guns in the song itself. Thus, although representing a tiny fraction of all songs on the yahoo database, depicting illegal (or irresponsible) firearms use may make youngsters and teenagers curious about such weapons and make them more likely to try to obtain or use such firearms. Great Britain’s Culture Secretary Kim Howell, for instance, outlined the relationships between the depiction of firearms in music and the “glamorization” of a youth gun culture (Mediawatch, United Kingdom, 2003). Although there is considerable speculation about the



relationships between music and gun violence, there is a dearth of empirical work that examines this issue.

Films, music videos, and television series that depicted violence increased throughout the 1980s—at approximately the same time that homicide rates also increased (see Shipley & Cavender, 2001, for an analysis of changes in film violence over time). Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson's (1999) analyses of films, television series, music videos, and movies in theatres revealed that there was an average of 31 violent scenes per hour in these programs—with serious (life-threatening) violence occurring at the rate of 14 scenes per hour (p. 30). More important, Lichter et al. (1999) “found that the top ten titles within each entertainment format contained a majority of the serious violence found in the entire example for that format” (p. 30). Soulliere (2003) observed that “guns add to the drama and excitement of the overall plot line of entertainment” (p. 20). To make this entertainment more interesting to viewers, we suggest that both the VPC and NRA are correct that one way to enhance the visual appeal of these films is to incorporate dangerous-looking AW.

### **Juvenile Perceptions and Self-Reports of Assault Weapons Use**

The third group that may also contribute to our misperceptions about the sophistication of firearms is juveniles themselves. Academic researchers, for instance, generally have relied on self-reports from youths interviewed in community or correctional settings for their information about juvenile gun use (see Sheley & Wright, 1993). Although either of these sources should provide reliable and valid information, both groups of juveniles may actually overreport their involvement with firearms and, in particular, AW.

Whereas law enforcement officials or political activists might exaggerate the sophistication or lethality of firearms used by youths, it is plausible that juveniles themselves also enhance both their experiences with firearms as well as their sophistication to the persons interviewing them. Most of our knowledge about juvenile firearms use is a product of interviews with incarcerated juvenile offenders (Birkbeck et al., 1999; Callahan, Rivara, & Farrow, 1993; Decker, 2000; Decker, Pennell, & Caldwell, 1998; Limber & Pagliocca, 1998; Rosenfeld & Decker, 1996; Sheley & Wright, 1993) or samples drawn from youths in the community (Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995; Hemenway, Prothrow-Stith, Bergstein, Ander, & Kennedy, 1996; Sadowski, Cairns, & Earp, 1989; Sheley & Brewer, 1995; Sheley & Wright, 1998). Regardless of the location of these respective studies, juvenile respondents generally told the researchers that they had some experience with firearms and that they were relatively easy to obtain. In addition, when juveniles were asked about their firearm of choice, they typically indicated a semiautomatic pistol of some description.

Sheley and Wright (1995), for instance, interviewed incarcerated youths and found that

inmates are more likely to have owned guns, to have carried guns and have had ready access to guns, to own assault-style weapons, to have owned sawed-off shotguns and have owned semi-automatic pistols. (p. 64)

Furthermore, incarcerated youths are likely to have experiences with firearms that are different from youths drawn from school samples. Youths who reported using firearms for sporting purposes indicated a preference for conventional rifles and shotguns, whereas those who used firearms for illegal purposes (e.g., carrying a concealed firearm) preferred handguns and sawed-off weapons (Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995).

Studies that have examined juveniles' self-reported behavior contrasted against official statistics reveal that this strategy has both strengths and weaknesses (Curry, 2000; Farrington et al., 2003). Although juveniles may not be the most competent or honest historians, there are several issues that may influence reporting their experiences with firearms. First, we suggest that some juveniles may exaggerate their involvement with such weapons to impress their peers or the interviewer. Studies of crime-involved firearms reveal that military-style AW are rarely recovered (Kopel, 1994; Koper & Roth, 2001, 2002; Roth & Koper, 1999; Ruddell & Mays, 2003). Exaggeration may explain the disjuncture between official statistics of crime-involved AW and these self-reports.

Alternatively, it is possible that at some point, a teenager has handled or temporarily possessed an AW, and this experience was considered "ownership." Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, and Howard (2000) found that the way that a question about firearms possession or ownership is posed can greatly influence the outcome of self-reported firearms use. Thus, it is possible that one AW circulating through a number of teenagers may create self-reported firearms possession that is higher than the firearms recovery or criminal involvement data reflect. It is more likely, however, that these juvenile offenders were just as confused about what defines an AW as the employees of news organizations or politicians. Thus, it is possible that a youth who has handled or possessed an SKS carbine (which is not generally considered an AW) might consider themselves having AW ownership and provide this information to researchers. Although the youth may be truthful, the information reported to researchers may be inaccurate.

### **Misleading Classifications of Juveniles in Firearms Scholarship**

The last source of misperceptions about juvenile gun use is that older populations are frequently aggregated with legally defined juvenile populations in official reports, scholarly research, and firearms advocacy. For instance, the ATF labels 18- to 24-year-olds as "youths" in their Youth Crime Gun Interdiction reports. Moreover, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has also included persons up to 24 years of age in their reports of juvenile gun violence (see Sheppard, Grant, Rowe, & Jacobs, 2000). Although technically correct, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also label all persons younger than age 20 as adolescents in their firearms mortality statistics (Murphy, 2000). It is possible the consumers of these reports might not distinguish between these populations and persons legally defined as juveniles. When we think of youths, juveniles, and adolescents, for instance, we aren't typically considering 19- or 23-year-olds.

A number of scholars also have classified legally defined juveniles and young adults together. Butts et al. (2002), for example, categorized persons aged 15 to 24 in their firearms mortality reports as "youths." Kennedy, Piehl, and Braga (1996), by contrast, classified all persons younger than 21 years of age as youths. Moreover, studies conducted by Blumstein (2002) and Fingerhut and Christoffel (2002) included 18- and 19-year-olds in their study of firearm deaths in youth populations. In fact, many groups that advocate for the stricter control of firearms typically include these young adults with juvenile populations when reporting mortality and morbidity statistics. Using age classifications similar to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, the Brady Campaign's mortality statistics of "children" also include 18- and 19-year-olds (Brady Campaign, 2004).



Misleading designations of firearms use do not help us understand the gun use of persons legally defined as juveniles. Moreover, because persons 18 years of age have legal access to more sophisticated firearms than their underaged counterparts, collapsing these groups together might lead us to believe that juveniles have access to AW. As the very nature of interest groups is to promote their political agenda—whether they advocate for stricter firearms laws (e.g., Americans for Gun Safety, Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, Handgun Free America, Million Mom March, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Violence Prevention Center) or against further gun laws (e.g., Gun Owners of America, Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, National Rifle Association)—it is likely that organizations on both sides of this controversial issue sometimes distort statistics about firearms use (or abuse). As the firearms literature is often so politically polarized, these inaccurate distinctions make it difficult to separate the reality from the rhetoric.

Consequently, we argue that there are four sources of misperceptions about juvenile firearms use. Some of the distortion about firearms use, however, may stem from the fact that the accurate classification of firearms is complex, and neither television reporters nor academic researchers may understand the differences between categories such as selective-fire (the ability to fire in semiautomatic or fully automatic modes), semiautomatic, or fully automatic.<sup>5</sup> As a result, a semiautomatic firearm that looks like a selective-fire assault weapon or a submachine gun can easily be misidentified. Legally owned fully automatic firearms, for instance, are rarely encountered and expensive, and their sales and manufacture are tightly regulated by the federal government.<sup>6</sup>

Although most, if not all, semiautomatic firearms can be converted to function as a fully automatic weapon, potential offenders might accurately perceive that such modifications will place them in jeopardy of very severe federal sanctions. Individuals may also be reluctant to convert semiautomatic firearms, as the parts may be difficult or expensive to obtain, and these modifications are beyond the skills of most juveniles. Fully automatic firearms are also more difficult to control without considerable training, and are therefore less accurate (Kleck, 2001). Within this study, we classify AW as those firearms that were restricted in the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill.<sup>7</sup>

## Evaluating Juvenile Gun Use

Perhaps the best method to reduce the confusion about the proliferation of AW in juvenile populations is to examine the numbers of AW that are actually recovered from offenders over time. Kopel (1994) reported data from 23 jurisdictions from Akron to Washington, D.C., prior to the 1994 implementation of the AW ban and found that few AW were involved in any crime. Most jurisdictions reported that approximately 1% of crime-involved firearms were AW. In Chicago, for instance, of the 17,144 guns seized by police in 1989, only 175 were military-style weapons, and only one homicide was caused by a “military caliber” rifle from 1985 to 1989 (Kopel, 1994).

Roth and Koper (1999) examined the effects of the 1994 AW ban and reported that one limitation of their study is that AW were rarely involved in gun crimes before the ban, making it difficult to find any statistically significant effect after implementation of the legislation (see also Koper & Roth, 2001, 2002). Moreover, Ruddell and Mays (2003) recently traced juvenile possession of AW in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1992 to 1999 and found that these firearms were rarely recovered by police from juvenile offenders.

One problem inherent in the study of AW is that the classifications of AW are based on cosmetic features of firearms, such as bayonet lugs, flash suppressors, pistol grips, or folding stocks (Jacobs, 2002; Wachtel, 1998). For instance, the Colt AR-15 series of semiautomatic rifles—the civilian version of the fully automatic M-16 rifle issued to U.S. soldiers—was subject to the 1994 AW restrictions, but the Ruger Mini-14 rifle was not banned. Yet, the Mini-14 is the same caliber, has a similar barrel length, the same semiautomatic action, and can use magazines that hold 30 rounds of ammunition. The only real meaningful difference between the two firearms is cosmetic: The AR-15 rifle looks more dangerous.

In fact, manufacturers of AW manipulated the provisions of the 1994 legislation by making minor cosmetic changes to their firearms in order to comply with the ban and still maintain sales of their firearms (see Roth & Koper, 1999). Manufacturers of different variants of the AR-15 rifle, for example, eliminated the bayonet lug and changed the function of the flash suppressor to comply with the new legislation. Such firearms were classified as “post-ban” guns, but these minor modifications did not alter the overall function of the firearm—and most users would be unable to spot these minor changes.

Our discussion suggests the importance of a conceptual explanation that includes the role of social construction of social problems. Scholars using this paradigm generally argue that the definitions of some social problems are the product of claimsmakers who undertake a political response to social or economic conditions, including crime and deviance. This approach finds support in the work of Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991), McCorkle and Miethe (2002), and St. Cyr (2003) that specifically examines youth gangs and youth violence. Ben-Yehuda (1990), Berger and Luckmann (1966), and Blumer (1969) provide a deeper theoretical perspective that underscores the role of interest groups, the public, and government agencies in constructing the basis of a social problem. Nested in the broader context of social constructionism, this article argues that the government, the entertainment industry, public interest groups, and some scholars have created an image of the problem of youth and assault weapons that exceeds that which is deserved by a closer examination of the data.

To evaluate whether our assessment of the perceptions of news organizations were in fact correct, we drew a sample of 45 newspaper editorials about the sunset of the AW ban that were published between May 15, 2003, and July 26, 2004. These features were published throughout the nation, although newspapers in large urban areas, such as Washington, D.C., or San Francisco, were overrepresented. We found that of these 45 editorials, 15, or one third, made at least one reference to juveniles, gangs, or school shootings such as the Columbine tragedy.<sup>8</sup> As newspaper editors would arguably have a wider understanding of these issues than the public, it is a safe assumption that the images of juveniles, gang members, and assault weapons are solidly entrenched in our awareness.

Despite reports by news organizations and law enforcement spokespersons that AW are widely available among youth, the results reported above suggest that AW are rarely encountered. This study expands our understanding of juvenile firearms use by examining two questions. First, this study uses ATF data from a number of large cities to evaluate whether AW were encountered as crime-involved guns between 1997 and 2000 (BATF, 1998, 2002). Second, we evaluate all of the firearms recovered from juveniles in two jurisdictions characterized by high rates of gang involvement and very high homicide rates: St. Louis, Missouri, and Washington, D.C. If juveniles are using AW, they should emerge in these national or local samples. If juveniles are not, in fact, using these AW in crimes, then we suggest that part of the juvenile gun use problem has been socially constructed.

## Data

This study examines crime-involved firearms recovered from legally defined juvenile offenders—persons younger than 18 years of age—in four annual ATF studies completed between 1997 and 2000, as well as all firearms recovered from juvenile offenders in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1992 to 2000 and Washington, D.C., between 1991 and 1995.

National-level ATF data come from requests for firearm traces for crime-involved guns in cities of 250,000 or more residents between 1997 and 2000. During this 4-year era, the number of participating sites expanded significantly: from 17 cities in 1997 to 40 in 2000. One factor that might limit the validity of these data is the fact that these crime-involved firearms are based on requests for traces made by local law enforcement agencies (see Jacobs, 2002; Kopel, 1999). Consequently, there may be some element of selection bias, although we suggest that the police would be more likely to trace an AW rather than other kinds of weapons. There is also an important methodological rationale for examining these urban sites as juvenile violence tends to be distributed primarily in urban areas, and if AW are encountered, it is plausible that they will be found in these cities.

We also examine firearms recovered in two large urban areas, St. Louis, Missouri, and Washington, D.C. Although both of these sites are included in the ATF data, our data are more comprehensive as they include all firearms recovered by the police rather than just those submitted for traces. Moreover, the city data include more physical characteristics of the firearms, such as barrel length, caliber, and make. Both St. Louis and Washington are characterized by high rates of lethal gun violence (see Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004), and we argue that if AW are prevalent, they should be found in these samples. The BATF (1998) data for August 1, 1997, through July 31, 1998, indicate that in St. Louis, no fully automatic firearms were traced that had been seized from either juveniles or adults, and in Washington, D.C., four fully automatic firearms were traced that had been seized from persons of unknown age.

The St. Louis data from January 1, 1992, to December 31, 2000, include 1,101 firearms recovered from legally defined juveniles (younger than age 17). The Washington data, by contrast, include 864 firearms recovered from legally defined juveniles between 1991 and 1995.<sup>9</sup> Juvenile firearms possession is an offense, so any firearm used by a juvenile without adult supervision is likely to be confiscated by the police. Nonpowder firearms, such as BB and pellet-guns, also are included in the analysis, as they are typically recovered from youths (Ruddell & Mays, 2003) and do have some capacity for serious injury (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1987) or lethality (Lawrence, 1990). The dates for this research were determined by the availability of data, although as these time periods include the peak in youth gun violence (Blumstein, 2002), they are most likely to include the use of assault weapons. Several cases that were missing data were excluded from the analysis, as were toy firearms or blank pistols.

Consistent with a number of other firearms recovery studies (e.g., Brill, 1977; Little & Boyen, 1990), we disaggregate firearms on the basis of handguns, rifles, or shotguns. Neither the 1996 nor 1997 ATF data included data about the caliber or model of the firearms recovered, so our ability to classify these guns into subcategories is somewhat limited and places increased importance on the city-level data. The St. Louis and Washington, D.C., data, by contrast, included model numbers of the firearms, calibers, and barrel length. As a result, we can further classify the data into categories such as SNS, AW, and whether the firearm has

**Table 1**  
**Juvenile Crime-Involved Firearms Traced in National Samples From 1997 to 2000**

Year	Total Firearms Recovered	Handguns Recovered	Shotguns Recovered	Rifles Recovered	Machine Guns Recovered	Estimated AW Recovered
1997	2762	2480	145	137	0	—
1998	3701	3243	172	286	0	—
1999	3790	3268	246	231	0	55 <sup>a</sup>
2000	4097	3487	310	300	0	62 <sup>a</sup>
Total	14,350	12,478	873	954	0	117
	100%	86.9%	6.9%	6.6%	0%	1.48%
						(1999-2000)

Source: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms (1998, 2001, 2002).

a. 1999 and 2000 assault weapon (AW) estimates are based on all .223, 9 mm, and 7.62 × 39 mm crime-involved rifles. Of these totals, 8 SKS carbines in 1999 and 24 in 2000 were recovered, which are not AW per se.

been illegally modified (e.g., sawed-off barrel). Our classification includes all firearms that were modified by the manufacturer to comply with the 1994 AW ban (the so-called post-ban guns). A second AW classification includes several other types of military-style semiautomatic firearms that were excluded from the ban but have a similar capacity for lethality, such as the SKS, Ruger Mini-14, and M1 carbines.

## Results

Table 1 summarizes the crime-involved firearms submitted to the ATF for tracing between 1997 and 2000. Similar to the results found in other studies of firearm recoveries, Table 1 reveals that the majority of firearms involved in juvenile crimes are handguns. Approximately 6% of all firearms recovered are rifles, and almost 7% are shotguns. Although there are no specific categories for AW, the ATF does track the recovery of fully automatic firearms, and Table 1 reveals that of the 14,350 guns recovered during this era, none were fully automatic.

ATF data from 1999 and 2000 include information about the calibers of the crime-involved firearms. AW tend to be chambered for military cartridges, and three military cartridges are commonly encountered: 9 mm, .223 Remington (5.56 mm NATO), and 7.62 × 39 mm. We included all of the rifles that chambered these cartridges and found a total of 117 guns. Even if all of these firearms were AW (32 were SKS carbines, which are not considered AW), they would represent only 1.5% of the total firearms recovered.

The St. Louis and Washington, D.C., firearms recovery data, by contrast, were more comprehensive, enabling us to categorize the firearms into different classifications, including SNS, Higher Lethality Handguns, nonpowder firearms, and illegally sawed-off rifles and shotguns. Although neither database specifically calculated whether a firearm was an AW, we created this category based on the 1994 Omnibus crime bill. We also added a second AW category that included a number of military-style semiautomatic firearms that are functionally similar to the banned firearms but appear less dangerous (e.g., the SKS, Ruger Mini-14, and M1 carbines, as well as the AA Industries AP-9 and several semiautomatic copies of submachine guns).

**Table 2**  
**Firearms Seized From Juveniles in Washington, D.C., and St. Louis**

Total Firearms (1965)	St. Louis (1101)	D.C. (864)	%
Handguns = 1658	857	801	84.38
Saturday Night Special <sup>a</sup>	313	198	26.00
Higher lethality <sup>b</sup>	100	244	17.51
Nonpowder <sup>c</sup>	94	35	6.56
Rifles = 160	147	13	8.14
Sawed-off <sup>d</sup>	27	2	1.48
Nonpowder	51	2	2.70
Shotguns = 144	97	47	7.33
Sawed-off <sup>d</sup>	70	27	4.94
Assault weapons	17	35	2.65
1994 ban <sup>e</sup>	7	26	1.68
Additional <sup>f</sup>	10	9	.97
Average threat level <sup>g</sup>	2.67	3.00	—
Less air guns	2.93	3.16	—

*Note:* Table will add up to more than 100% because assault weapons (AW) are included in both the handgun and rifle categories.

- a. .32 caliber or less, with a barrel length of less than 3.1 inches.
- b. All 9 mm., .40 S&W, .357 magnum, .45 ACP, .41 and .44 magnum revolvers and pistols.
- c. Typically BB or pellet guns.
- d. Sawed-off rifles and shotguns as defined by the National Firearms Act (1934).
- e. AW include 19 firearms banned in the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill (see endnote 7).
- f. Additional includes SKS, M1, and Ruger Mini-14 carbines, as well as AA, AP9, and TEC-9.
- g. Difference of threat level significant at  $p < .001$  for all firearms, and after nonpowder firearms were removed from the sample.

Consistent with the data from the national sample reported above, Table 2 reveals that most of the firearms recovered from juveniles were handguns. Within this classification, many of the firearms recovered were SNS—handguns that chamber small-bore low velocity cartridges and have barrels less than 3.1 inches. Although value of firearms is commonly used in classification of SNS (Cook, 1991; Shine, 1998), data about the cost of these firearms were not available. Table 2 also demonstrates that SNS were much more likely to be encountered in St. Louis than in Washington, D.C., where higher lethality handguns were more prevalent.

In addition, rifles and shotguns were much more likely to be recovered from juveniles in St. Louis. This finding might be a consequence of St. Louis's proximity to rural surroundings where hunting and target shooting are more common. Our data reveal that many of the rifles and shotguns in our sample were illegally sawed-off. Excluding the nonpowder firearms, 126 of the 251 rifles and shotguns were sawed-off. This is an important finding, as 97 of these weapons were sawed-off shotguns, regarded as one of the most lethal firearms at close range (DiMaio, 1985).

The numbers of AW recovered by police were calculated using the firearms banned by the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill. Washington, D.C., had a higher representation of these weapons, but of the total of 1,965 firearms, only 33 (or 1.68%) were AW. When we expanded the definition of AW to include several other military-style firearms, our sample was increased to



2.65% of all firearms recovered from juveniles. Consequently, sawed-off firearms were twice as likely to be encountered by police than AW. Handguns, by contrast, were more than 30 times more likely to be encountered than AW.

Finally, the mean threat level of the firearms seized from juveniles in both cities was calculated using a modified NIJ Threat Level Scale (see Ruddell & Mays, 2002). This scale classifies cartridge lethality on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest). This scale enabled us to contrast the differences between the mean lethality of firearms from both cities, and Table 2 reveals that the average firearms seized from Washington, D.C., youths are slightly more lethal than their St. Louis counterparts (3.16 in Washington compared with 2.93 in St. Louis). This finding may be a consequence of the greater numbers of higher lethality handguns seized from Washington youths. To determine whether there was a difference between the two groups, a *t* test was conducted, and there was a statistically significant difference between the two cities in the lethality of firearms ( $p < .001$ ) in the entire sample, and after nonpowder firearms were excluded from the analyses.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The sunset of the 1994 Assault Weapons ban in September 2004 has contributed to considerable debate between different interest groups (e.g., NRA, 2003; VPC, 2003) about the long-term effects of this legislative change. It is very conceivable that politicians, interest groups, and police officials will continue to argue that AW use by juveniles is very prevalent. We found that one third of a sample of newspaper editorials in 2003-2004, for instance, made reference to juveniles in their discussion of the AW ban. Certainly, this perspective is promoted in the entertainment industries as well as research that misrepresents persons 18 years of age and older as "youths." Our study demonstrates that approximately 2% of all firearms recovered from juveniles might be classified as AW. The national data of large urban areas collected by the ATF from 1996 to 2000 reveal that juveniles typically use relatively unsophisticated firearms in crimes, especially if contrasted against adult firearm use. Like their adult counterparts, juveniles rarely use AW in crimes.

Disaggregating the sample of city firearms reveals that air guns, SNS, or .22 caliber rifles are most frequently confiscated from youths. These are typically the same types of firearms that law enforcement encountered in the 1950s or 1960s. Our intent is not to diminish the harm that these firearms can pose—especially when fueled by adolescent aggression, gang involvement, or rivalry within illegal urban drug markets (Lizotte, Howard, Krohn, & Thornberry, 1997; Lizotte et al., 2000; Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996). We argue that interventions to reduce juvenile firearms use be driven by empirical research rather than anecdotal accounts, or powerful visual images intended to sell commercials on television news, or movie tickets.

Youths undoubtedly have used AW in offenses, and it is possible that police reports of these isolated cases drive sensational reports from news organizations and give politicians additional "ammunition" for their violence-reduction platforms. We identified four different plausible causes for the social construction of an AW problem, including bolstering the fortunes of law enforcement agencies or political capital of politicians or powerful interest groups. In addition, youths may contribute to these distortions, as they may overreport their involvement with these types of firearms—a situation more likely to occur if they are not aware of definitions of AW. It is also likely that persons interviewing these juveniles are not



very sophisticated about firearms and would not be able to define an AW. These perceptions might be reinforced when we watch films, music videos, or television programs that depict urban youth violence where youngsters have access to military-style firearms that are capable of fully automatic fire.

The social construction of a juvenile AW problem rests on the three social processes outlined by Berger and Luckmann (1966). We gather our ideas about juvenile gun use primarily through news reports and the entertainment media. Sometimes these stories are based on anecdotal or sensational accounts of rare events, and these accounts may be embellished by persons who have a stake in juvenile offenders depicted as being more dangerous than they actually are. In some cases, this “disinformation” may be circulated by law enforcement agents, political activists, scholars, or the youths themselves.

In some cases, the circulation of these misleading concepts is not intentional—youths may, for instance, exaggerate self-reported involvement with firearms based on their ignorance of a true AW. Similar distortions are probably repeated by newsmakers and reporters based on the complex definitions of what represents an AW. The relatively benign causes of our misperceptions are counterbalanced by political activists who may deliberately mislead the public to further the objectives of their organizations. Moreover, scholars and government agencies that includes 23 year olds in their classifications of youths and adolescents are guilty of adding to the confusion.

Whatever the source, our review of newspaper editorials preceding the sunset of the AW ban suggests that there is a disconnect between the actual problem of juvenile AW use and the images that are portrayed by news organizations and entertainment industries. Yet, it is important that we develop interventions to reduce the proliferation of firearms illegally possessed by juveniles. As Zimring (2003) observes, “What will improve the gun debate at the top end of the policy community is careful attention to the differences between types and intensities of firearm regulation” (p. 452). An important first step before considering the efficacy of different types of firearms legislation is recognizing the boundaries of this social problem (see Hahn et al., 2003). A primary goal in undertaking this study, then, was to examine one element of juvenile firearms use, and our findings suggest that the use of AW by juveniles is rare.

This study reveals, by contrast, that a more serious problem facing policy makers is the proliferation of handguns in these populations. Handguns are 30 times as likely to be encountered by law enforcement than AW. As a result, further research is needed to determine how adolescents choose the weapons they possess and whether their decisions are motivated by price, availability, style, or size (Kennedy et al., 1996), the status it can offer a young person (Birkbeck et al., 1999; Keene, 1997), or whether the firearm is new and can’t be linked to any crime. Interviews with adult offenders reveal that approximately 12% obtain their firearms through legitimate sources (such as licensed firearms dealers; see Harlow, 2001), but we know very little about how (and where) juveniles obtain their firearms—an important issue given that persons younger than age 21 cannot legally purchase a handgun in the United States from a federally licensed firearms dealer.

Given our findings, it is important to ask who benefits from portraying the weapons used by youths as more violent than they are. A number of scholars have identified how problems can be socially constructed—the existence and threat of a problem can be created by groups that benefit from the changing definitions of a social problem (Conrad & Schneider, 1992). By depicting youths as inherently more sophisticated or violent than their predecessors, for

instance, we can justify more intensive interventions to reduce risk. In theory, these interventions can range from enhancing social programs to reduce the risk of delinquency to bolstering the size and sophistication of law enforcement responses to combat crime to increased use of incarceration. While generally foregoing the use of social programs to respond to social problems such as entrenched and concentrated poverty, racism, or high rates of alcohol or drug addiction, we instead rely on criminal justice interventions (Miller, 1996). In response to increasing violence in the 1980s and 1990s, police agencies received larger budgets, and the size of juvenile and gang units increased (McCorkle & Miethe, 2002). Moreover, in response to these perceptions, probation officers armed themselves, wore body armor, and associated closely with law enforcement—in sharp contrast to previous generations of social-work trained probation officers who saw themselves as helpers (Miller, 1996).

Other groups benefited from depicting youths, especially inner-city kids, as AW-toting thugs. Our cultural industries, for instance, were presented with new villains to portray in films, television, or music videos. Koopmans (2003) questions whether “the glorification of guns by many rap artists, for example, merely reflect the realities of inner-city life, or does it also contribute to the problem of gun violence?” (p. 10).

Our study suggests that these portrayals of AW use do not reflect reality. These images do, however, shape beliefs about juveniles, gun use, and the methods that society should use to respond to these problems. One unanticipated consequence of such stereotypes is that they may also make such weapons more attractive to gang-involved youths who want to have the same sophisticated firepower as they perceive that their rivals own, contributing to a “juvenile arms race.” The role of the entertainment industry in creating desirable negative images has also been documented among gang members (see Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

News organizations are quick to reflect film stereotypes about guns and violence: Kleck (2001) characterizes how facts about firearms use (and abuse) in television news have been distorted—or at least sensationalized—for several decades. Politicians and the police were also able to use the problems of crime and drug use to advance their interests (Beckett & Sasson, 2000). With so many powerful social groups benefiting from these changing perceptions, it is unlikely that many would question the appropriateness of these social definitions or the methods we chose to respond to juvenile crime.

## Notes

1. AK-47 rifles that are able to fire in fully automatic mode are very rare—it is estimated that several hundred were legally imported into the United States. Semiautomatic versions of these firearms—imported from China, or former Soviet Republics—are typically mislabeled as AK-47s.

2. A zip gun is a colloquial term for a homemade single-shot firearm that typically chambered low velocity handgun ammunition. Kopel (1993) notes how these crude firearms can be constructed using tubing, tape, a pin, a key, whittle wood, and rubber bands.

3. Saturday Night Special refers to inexpensive, short-barreled pistols or revolvers that chamber less lethal cartridges such as the .22 long rifle, .25 automatic, and .32 calibers. There is some dispute in the literature about the exact definition of a SNS (see Cook, 1991; Shine, 1998).

4. During the same era, the rate of inflation was 192%.

5. Perhaps the best explanation of the differences between different classifications of firearms is outlined in Kopel (1994).

6. The number of legally registered fully automatic weapons currently in civilian hands is 278,958 firearms (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms, 2001). To illustrate the cost of these firearms, a used UZI (one of the

most inexpensive types of fully automatic weapon available) currently retails for approximately \$6,000.00, and this does not include the \$200.00 federal transfer tax.

7. The 19 firearms banned from further importation include the AK-47 and its variants, the UZI and Galil, Beretta AR-70, Colt AR-15, FN/FAL, FN/LAR and FNC, the SWD M-10, M-11, M-11/0 and M-12, Steyr AUG, TEC-9, TEC9 and TEC 22, and the Street Sweeper and Striker 12 shotguns.

8. All references to juveniles, teenagers, Columbine (school shooting), and gangs were counted. A second rater independently reviewed these results and there was 100% agreement with the findings.

9. Washington, D.C., has 114,936 juveniles younger than age 18, whereas St. Louis has 89,657 juveniles within the same age group. By comparing 4 years of these data (D.C. from 1991 to 1995; STL from 1992 to 1996), we found that 864 firearms were recovered in Washington, whereas 773 were recovered in St. Louis. The rate of firearms recoveries per 1,000 youths was 7.52 in Washington, D.C., and 8.64 in St. Louis.

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