

NEWS

Four guns stolen in Wisconsin have been linked to dozens of shootings here. Authorities say it's an example of how illegal guns end up on the streets of Chicago.



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The burglar had the perfect diversion.

It was a few hours past midnight on New Year's Day 2016, a time when the working-class northern Wisconsin town of Superior keeps the bars open especially late.

Police were tied up with two bar fights, one of them a 30-person brawl at a local saloon called the Ugly Stick



Sporting a blue hooded winter coat, orange ski mask and shoe covers, he tried to break in through a set of doors on the north side of the building.

No luck.

He tried another door.

Still no luck. But eventually the burglar found one he could get through.

"Nobody could believe that he could pry it open, but he did," shop owner Patricia Kukull told the Tribune at her home in Superior. What is less baffling to Kukull is what would happen next.

"They're going right down to Chicago or Minneapolis," she recalled thinking about the handguns stolen from one of her glass display cases that night. The burglar used a crowbar to smash his way through.

"They'll be there in 24 hours," Kukull remembered saying, "and it's not going to be good."

And she wasn't too far off. It was just 12 days later, authorities believe, when one of those pistols was fired from a car in the southbound lanes of the Chicago Skyway around 97th Street, killing a 25-year-old road manager for a rap group who was driving his new BMW coupe.

The victim, Elliott Brown, was described by relatives as the "gem" of his family. His 23-year-old girlfriend, also in the car, was shot in the arm.

The pistol likely used in that shooting was among at least nine handguns that authorities say the burglar made off with from Kukull's shop.

At least four of them made it to Chicago, bringing with them bloodshed and grief.

Police and experts have said gun thefts in neighboring states — along with straw purchases — are a source of the illegal guns that feed Chicago's violence problem. The Tribune spent months examining hundreds of documents obtained through open records requests to outline and understand the fallout from just one such break-in.

Guns that end up on Chicago's streets often come from Indiana and Wisconsin. In 2019, of more than 11,000 guns confiscated by Illinois authorities, 460 were traced back to Wisconsin, which ranked third for states with the most gun traces outside of Illinois, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

One of the handguns taken from Kukull's shop, a 9 mm Glock 17, was the focus of [a Tribune investigation after it was linked to 27 shootings](#), including two homicides, making it one of the most active guns seen by Chicago police in recent memory.

According to ballistics testing by the Chicago Police Department, that gun and three other pistols that made it to the city from Wisconsin are preliminarily connected to at least 35 shootings in total, three of them homicides.

The burglary at the Wisconsin shop was another episode in what police said is an established connection between Chicago and towns along the western tip of Lake Superior. Drugs often move north from Chicago, officials said, and sometimes firearms head south.



Superior Shooters Supply, in Superior, Wisconsin, on March 29, 2021.

From January through June 2020, there were 284 burglaries nationwide at licensed dealers in which some 3,700 firearms were stolen, according to statistics from the ATF, which enforces regulations on legal gun sales.

"Bad guys in Chicago, they might be smaller fish in Chicago, but they're a big fish when they come here," said Thomas Champaigne, captain of investigations for the Superior Police Department. "It's easy for them to (use) their muscle here."

The other guns

Superior investigators working on the break-in at Kukull's shop were not only looking for who did it, they were also trying to track the whereabouts of a significant amount of firepower.

"My job is to protect the community," a Superior police detective said in a calm but concerned tone during a videotaped interview of a suspect in the burglary given to the Tribune as part of an open records request. "I want to get those dangerous things off the street. OK?"

But the man he was speaking to, who would later be charged in the burglary, wasn't giving up much.

They made small talk over coffee. Leddy was enthusiastic about the French vanilla creamer the detective offered him. There's only black coffee in the county lockup where he was being held on other charges.

The two chatted about their common love for cookies and other sweets. In an orange jumpsuit, Leddy talked about his love for peanut butter and how he was looking forward to buying some from the jail commissary, along with some saltine crackers.

He talked about changes he'd made while locked up. How he'd joined two church groups and started a GED program.

"You know, I'm actually proud to say this is the first time in my life I'm changing things around," Leddy, 21 at the time, told the detective during their February 2016 meeting. "My daughter doesn't deserve to have a dad like this."

 A Superior Police Department detective interviews Dexter Leddy about the burglary of Superior Shooters Supply in February 2016. Leddy would later be convicted in the case after pleading no contest to felony theft instead of the burglary charge and was sentenced to eight months in jail.

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The detective applauded Leddy's efforts but then got down to business.

"My big thing is guns out there in bad people's hands kill people," the detective said. "Much like, you wouldn't want (your daughter) to be tied up in that. ... You're talking about being a dad."

Gradually, Leddy went from chatty to defensive.

He admitted to the detective that he heard about the gun shop burglary. But when the detective told Leddy multiple people contacted Superior police and implicated him, he denied knowing what the detective was talking about.

"On my daughter's life, I don't have no guns," Leddy told the detective. "I've

"It was nice meeting you, though," Leddy said, shaking the detective's hand.

"Hey, thank you for the cup of coffee. I greatly appreciate it."

In September 2017, Leddy was convicted in the case after pleading no contest to felony theft, instead of a burglary charge. He was sentenced to eight months in jail, three years' probation, and ordered to pay more than \$4,400 in restitution.

More damage

By that month, at least four of the handguns were being used on Chicago's streets. Another wound up in Peoria.

Records show that aside from the Glock linked to 27 shootings in Chicago, the three other guns were tied to more shootings in the city, striking at least 10 people and killing one of them.

The shootings disproportionately took place on the South Side, most dramatically a two-block stretch in the historic Pill Hill neighborhood.

— A 9 mm Glock 26 was confiscated by Chicago police from a teenager six months after the break-in when officers chased him in the Fuller Park neighborhood, records show.

— A .40-caliber Glock 27 was linked to at least three shootings, two on the South Side between March and September 2016. The shootings included one in the Englewood neighborhood when two people were shot inside a car during an exchange of gunfire. The gun was taken off the street in 2018 after police arrested a convicted felon. The 25-year-old man had fled from a car, and the pistol was found on a nearby roof.

— Another 9 mm Glock was linked to the shootings of at least eight people including the slaying of Elliott Brown and wounding of his girlfriend in January 2016. Others injured included a 7-year-old shot outside her school and a 23-year-old shot in the arm, shoulder and face in the 9100 block of South Chappel Avenue in Pill Hill. The gun came off the street in August 2019 after police recovered it and another gun from a Chevy Malibu.

At least five people have faced criminal charges related to their use or possession of the guns.



The scene of a shooting on the Indiana Tollway that killed Elliot Brown on Jan. 13, 2016.

The cost of all it, from treating physical injuries to the arrest, prosecution and detention of offenders, is shared by all Chicagoans.

And there is the repeated cycle of trauma that is both a cause and result in Chicago's handgun violence, much of which happens repeatedly in parts of the city where social structures and public safety are lacking and the line between victim and perpetrator is sometimes blurred.

Consider the use of the 9 mm Glock fired in shootings in the Pill Hill neighborhood, including in the wounding of the 23-year-old shot on Chappel.

A man charged in that shooting, Jarius Hongo, grew up on the next block, raised by his mother and grandmother. But he was still exposed to violence as a child, according to a 2013 Tribune feature story that explained how gangs were taking over his neighborhood.

At just 11, Hongo and his best friend Derrick Davis, the story detailed, were already being lured by local, older gang members and engaging in high-risk behavior, such as playing with handguns.

"We'd point it and walk around with it. It was fun," Hongo said then. "We wasn't going to do nothing. To me, it was to look cool."

And about four years later it was Hongo who opened fire in the area, striking another young man in the neighborhood. Hongo, now 25, is serving a prison sentence for attempted murder.

An unassuming town

With a population of about 27,000, Superior shares Wisconsin's northern border with Duluth, Minnesota, two cities aptly referred to as the "Twin Ports" situated along Lake Superior.

Superior has a large railroad industry as a major hub for transporting cargo throughout the Great Lakes. The town is also home to one of the largest ports in the U.S. from which iron ore and coal are regularly shipped.

The unassuming town is typically Midwestern, with perhaps its most notable celebrity tie being Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was reportedly in town at least occasionally in the late 1970s while getting his bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin at Superior.



Superior, Wisconsin, seen from Duluth, Minnesota, across the St. Louis River on March 29, 2021.

Superior, which has about 60 sworn officers, is the type of town that can go a couple of years without a homicide. But fights, burglaries and shoplifting

And it has struggled with a drug problem, particularly with methamphetamine, authorities said. Nearby Duluth, a city with three times Superior's population, may be the catalyst.

Added to the mix is the connection that criminals in the Twin Ports have with those 150 miles away in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and 460 miles away in Chicago, police said.

The drug prices in Chicago are far cheaper than the prices in Superior and Duluth, said Champaigne, the police captain. A drug dealer can make four times in the Twin Ports than they'd make in Chicago, for instance.

"You can spend \$1,000 in Chicago and bring it up here and turn it around for \$5,000," said Champaigne, sitting in a conference room at the Superior Police Department headquarters.

Authorities in Superior and Duluth have handled investigations over the last several years involving drug dealers from Chicago. In a 2017 federal court filing, prosecutors explained that officers noticed how "dealers often come from Chicago and rent a room some place for a week, parcel out the drugs, make a killing and then hit the road."

The Tribune examined extensive court records related to criminal cases in the Superior-Duluth region, including one defendant who set up shop at a small roadside hotel and another in an apartment complex.

"(When) we were dealing with large quantities of heroin ... more often than not, it was somebody ... from Chicago that had brought it in," Superior police Detective Sean Holmgren said from the parking lot of the Superior Inn earlier this year. "Not to say that there weren't instances where sometimes it would come from Minneapolis or somewhere else. ... The vast majority of the time it's coming from Chicago."



The Superior Inn in Superior, Wisconsin, where police once investigated a suspected drug dealer from Chicago.

The Superior Inn in Superior, Wisconsin, where police once investigated a suspected drug dealer from Chicago.

One high-profile case involved Michael Clark, a Chicago man who was sentenced to about six years in prison in 2017 in a federal investigation that

"It's real good," Clark said in a Facebook conversation with an associate, according to federal court records related to the case. "They been overdosing on it too much i need to hit it bro we killed like 4pp."

The drugs have also increased the risk of an overdose in a community where drug use had become a public health concern, authorities said.

On its website, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services breaks down the state into five regions to rank their rates of drug overdoses and drug-related deaths. In 2019, Douglas County, which includes Superior, had one of the highest rates in the state of hospital emergency room visits for all overdoses on opioids, with 52.3 per 100,000 people, the data shows.

Clark eventually was sentenced in a different case to 10 years behind bars for a possessing 40 grams or more of fentanyl with the intention of distributing it at the Baywalk Inn, a hotel in Superior near the Richard I. Bong Memorial Bridge, which leads to Duluth.

His conviction in that case was later vacated and he's awaiting trial again. He had complained to the judge at the time that he didn't get a fair trial.

"Even Ray Charles could have come up here and beat this trial for me because the simple fact is I actually went to trial because in my heart I know, and them polices know, I really didn't do nothing," Clark said at his sentencing in the case where his conviction was vacated. He's now in Cook County Jail, also awaiting trial in an attempted-murder case.

More Chicago ties

In October 2016, Chicago police investigating a homicide found what they believed was a getaway car in a vacant lot on the South Side.

The car, authorities alleged, belonged to a man who has faced multiple drug-dealing allegations in the Twin Ports area. On the windshield that October day were 9 mm shell casings.

The casings did not match those recovered at the scene of the homicide police were looking into, but the 9 mm casings were tagged and examined. Later they were found to have been fired from one of the guns taken from Kukull's shop — the Glock linked to 27 shootings — by Chicago police and the

Police and court records show that the man, from the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago and known as “Gotti” in the Twin Ports area, operated out of apartments or motels, allegedly like Clark, interacting with local sellers and users.

Just two weeks after the break-in at Kukull’s shop, the man was arrested by the Lake Superior Drug and Violent Crime Task Force after a cooperating witness allegedly purchased a gram of heroin from him in a Kmart parking lot, according to a Duluth police report.

And “Gotti” was convicted of selling drugs after yet another arrest later that year, in July 2016, when police raided a Duluth apartment complex where he was staying. Authorities seized fentanyl from a car that had been rented in Chicago.

The man was charged in the Chicago homicide as the getaway driver and has pleaded not guilty.

No one — including “Gotti” — has been charged with getting the guns stolen from Kukull’s shop to Chicago. All Superior police can do is make an educated guess — based on drug distribution targets they’ve investigated — that the guns were sold in the illicit marketplace between the Twin Ports and Chicago.

There was one clue included in the police reports released to the Tribune. A witness told investigators that he believed the alleged burglar, Dexter Leddy, sold guns to a Chicago man who went by the name “Gotti.”

Neither the man charged as the getaway driver who used that name nor his attorney would comment for this story.

‘I take it really personally’

Back at the shop where the burglary took place, the staff said they are well aware of the risks involved in running a business that sells a product highly sought after on the street.

On a Monday afternoon earlier this year, customers milled around Superior Shooters Supply, where gun safes, gun boxes, paper targets, holsters, hunting gear and more were on display.

There were guns too, of course. Rifles neatly lined the walls behind the

Shelves that are normally stocked with ammunition — with big names such as Winchester, Hornady and Remington — were largely empty. Taped to the shelving were small signs instructing customers to ration whatever ammo they want to buy.

“LIMIT ON HANDGUN AMMUNITION. 50 ROUNDS PER CALIBER,” one sign read. “38 SPECIAL ONE BOX PER PERSON,” another read.

Kukull, the longtime owner of the shop, stood at a counter, occasionally working the floor as customers drifted in and out.

Guns are part of the culture in northern Wisconsin, and Kukull's store has operated in Superior since 1979.

One of her employees, Chris Warner, stood near the site of the old display case that was smashed and emptied in 2016.

 A showcase at Superior Shooters Supply in Superior, Wisconsin, where the Glock 17 9 mm handgun was stolen on New Year's Day 2016.

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Warner noted the popularity of Glock 17s, including among law enforcement and military personnel. They're light and they carry 17 bullets in a standard magazine.

“I have a Gen-3 Glock 17. It has over 45,000 rounds fired through that one gun,” said Warner. “It's a super safe gun. ... It's a gun that will last.”

Guns are sold legally at federally licensed dealers to people who submit to a background check, a move to hopefully keep guns out of the hands of people with a track record of criminal behavior. Individual states have created additional safeguards. In Illinois, for example, gun ownership requires obtaining a firearm owner's identification card.

But it's a constant worry for law enforcement that guns will seep through the legal market and into the hands of criminals either through straw purchases or burglaries such as the one that victimized Kukull and her shop.

Nationally, the number of stolen guns from federally licensed firearm dealers jumped by about 5% from 2018 to 2020, according to ATF statistics cited by advocacy organization Everytown for Gun Safety. In Wisconsin, there were 217 guns stolen from firearm dealers in 2020 compared with 97 in 2018, the figures show.

From January through June 2020, there were 284 burglaries nationwide at licensed dealers in which some 3,700 firearms were stolen, according to statistics from the ATF, which enforces regulations on legal gun sales.

After the New Year's Day 2016 break-in, Kukull said she beefed up the durability of the door the burglar entered and replaced the glass case he smashed. New display cases in the shop have a steel shutter that Kukull's staff can use to protect them at closing time.

And within the last five years, her staff parked a forklift in the back of a garage door in a receiving area of the store. That's designed to prevent a smash-and-grab burglary with a vehicle, crimes she became concerned about after hearing they happened in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Over the years, Kukull insists she's done the best she can to provide security for her store. But she gets discouraged.

"I take it really personally, and I don't know anybody who wouldn't take it personally," she said of her guns being stolen and eventually used in crimes. "I'm Catholic, so I'm guilty all the time. But ... I don't feel that guilty about it because I didn't tell that person to shoot that person. ... I guess I get more angry than anything."

'Mom on a mission'

Five years after the break-in at Kukull's shop, both gun violence in Chicago and opioid addiction in Superior and Duluth continue to rage.

And there are mothers forever changed on both ends.

In Duluth was Jill Wherley, a mother who was searching for her daughter, who was missing and had a history of drug use.

In court records, Wherley was aptly referred to as the "mom on a mission" when, acting on a tip from one of her daughter's friends, she went looking for

 Jill Wherley in her beauty salon in Hermantown, Minnesota, on March 30, 2021.

Jill Wherley in her beauty salon in Hermantown, Minnesota, on March 30, 2021.

As the police moved to arrest Clark, an officer told Wherley to leave the parking lot. Hours later with Clark in custody, she got a call from an officer, who told her that her daughter was not found.

Wherley's daughter eventually made contact. Wherley doesn't talk to her face to face but still texts her as a way to maintain even the thinnest connection.

"At least if I text her, I can see that it'll say 'read' ... underneath it," Wherley told the Tribune in the hair salon that she operates outside of Duluth. "So I'm like, 'Yes! She's alive.' "

Meanwhile in Chicago, there are many mothers who are in a daily fight for strength after losing their children to gun violence.

One of them was Corniki Bornds, a mother whose son was one of the three people killed in shootings linked to the guns stolen from Kukull's shop.

She also works as a hairstylist. She copes with her loss by hosting online prayer groups and honoring her son in an annual scholarship celebration. But she knows she will never be the same. Even the sound of firetrucks and ambulances, which were so common in her Chicago neighborhood, became too much.

"I moved a year ago," Bornds said. "I tried to stay."

Chicago Tribune's Rosemary Sobol contributed.

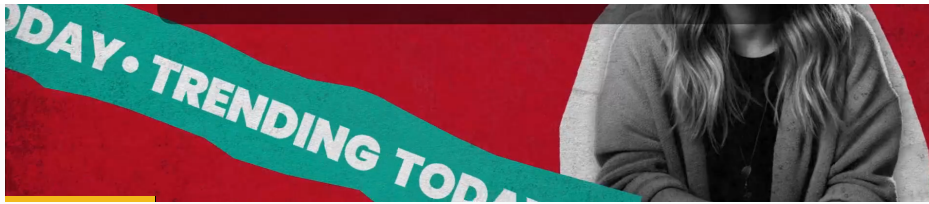
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