So, this story is sort of a culmination of my work of covering firearms at *The Columbia Missourian*. I’ve been called the “gun guy” there for just about two years. This story incorporates news data with leftover data from my own previous reporting. The story started off kind of simple with an ordinary question: What kind of guns are in the Columbia Police Department’s evidence locker?

While the actual numbers of the locker weren’t obtained until this semester, I actually ended up using several different sets of data (all will be linked in here by the way). But to get to the point, there are a lot of stolen firearms in CPDs evidence locker. AK47s, AR15s, even a sniper rifle—but the data tells a lot more than that.

**Summary, Record Layouts, Definitions, Documentation (A., B., D., H.,)**

The new files I was working with was by no means a 10K page document. Rather, the original list of the department’s inventory at the time of the request was a measly 800 entries. The list itself only had seven different columns as well for each entry: Date, Incident Number, Reason, Brand, Model, Description and Caliber. Right off the bat there are several issues with the data and how it was originally provided.

The only three columns that have a uniform form of entry, like a specific style for each date, were the following categories: Date, Incident Number and Reason. The Date and Incident Number categories were the easiest to work with. The date was styled by month, day year, specific time on a 24-hour basis: as an example, 6/8/19 6:13. I did however notice that the time at the very end sometimes defaulted to 0:00 but the dates were quite important at linking specific guns to specific crimes—I’ll go into this soon.

The Incident Numbers were styled by year followed by the number. So, the previously mentioned gun that had the date I mentioned in the graph above had the incident number of: 2019005789. The handy thing about these numbers is that you can tell when guns that aren’t checked in on the same date are a part of the same case. So, for example, when you sort by incident number, you will get plenty of guns that share Incident Numbers but not dates—why? Because they were a part of the same case.

There are no specific guidelines as to how CPD must maintain these records. They do have to report at least the weapon types to the ATF—that being said the ATF has a lose set of definitions as well. This data is used and exists mainly for criminal investigations—the officer I spoke to –Will get to that in a bit pointed out that they don’t use it for that much else. In fact I was the first person so ask for this range of data to his knowledge.

The reason category was uniform as well. All entries fell under: Stolen, Recovered, Evidence, Seized, Safekeeping, None, or Lost. I reached out to Officer Bolinger from the Columbia Police Department, who I have quoted in previous reporting to ask for the definitions for each category so here they are.

Stolen: a firearm that is believed to have been stolen, a firearm that was caught on an individual during a theft/burglary, a firearm that was found on an individual that was reported missing or stolen by the owner, a firearm that was found or seized that was listed as missing by a wholesaler or store. Simple right?

Recovered: can be a stolen firearm, but it is in the process of being returned to its lawful owner. Some guns that are categorized as stolen will eventually fall under this category once it is no longer needed as evidence.

Evidence: these are firearms that were seized during a crime that the department believes occurred. These can also be stolen firearms, but they can also be weapons used in shootings that are found on or near the scene of a reported homicide.

Seized: these are firearms that may be seized from individuals that have not actually committed a crime. There are only a couple entries in the data provided. Officer Bolinger pointed out that when someone is involuntarily “institutionalized,” his wording not mine, law enforcement can seize and individuals’ firearms. He said it is rare and that the burden to show that someone shouldn’t have the firearm is quite high.

Safekeeping: This is pretty easy—these are guns that people check in to the public gun locker at the station for a variety of reasons. Some people check them in if they feel like they are going through “a rough patch.” Others check them in when they are gone from home for extended periods of time and they would rather have the firearm locked up at the police station rather than there home. This category was more common than the seized category but it was still rare.

None: So, I was told “yea that category just needs to be fixed.” It apparently encapsulates firearms that under the old definition would “more than likely fall under” the seized and safekeeping category. Apparently, those two categories were made after the fact and the few entries that have NONE are from before the new entry time.

Lost: Most of these are firearms that the department has either collected because people “found them” or these are firearms that they themselves “find.” Bolinger said that it was “quite rare”—the dataset corroborates this.

The brand and model categories as a whole were a mess and took quite a bit of cleaning. Bolinger told me that the Brand column should be “the manufacturer, brand, fabricator, gunsmith, you know get what I’m saying who made it.” The Model column is “like how you would categorize a car model. If the brand was Ford, The Model would be F-150. In gun speak, Beretta would be the Brand, 92FS would be the model,” Bolinger said.

The first issue with the original data is that for starters, it was riddled with misspelling that made working with the data practically impossible in the original state. Beretta, for example, was misspelled in more than four different ways. This is just one example of the kind of “cleaning” the data needed. This had to be done because if I wanted to know how many firearms made by Beretta were used in crimes in December 2018, the sequel code would have to account for all of the different misspellings that you’d only know if you went through the data.

In this case, I searched by B originally (code will be attached). It then realized just how many gun brands begin with the letter B: Bear Creak, Benelli, Beretta, Bersa, Black Rain, Bond Arms, Browning, Bryco and Bushmaster were all brands in the locker. I couldn’t use “Be” either because of Bear Creak, Benelli and Bersa all have a “Be.” Couldn’t use “Ber” either because of Bersa. So I ended up using a function that included all “Ber”s but excluded all that had an “s” in them.

Now imagine doing that, but for every single gun brand. That is what the end result of this dataset looks like. I cleaned every single entered entry for the brand (if present).

The model category was far more complex. Using the Ford F-150 analogy again, just like how you can buy a couple versions of an F-150 (Platinum, King Ranch Edition, etc.) the same can be applied to guns. So, there may be a Beretta 92FS in the locker but it may also be a “compact” or “sub-compact” model.

Glock, in this case might be a better example from the data, differentiate each gun by a model number. Each number say, a Glock 19, references not only the size of the handgun but the caliber as well! A Glock 19 is chambered for 9mm, Glock 31 for .357 Sig, etc. This category, like the previous one had plenty of misspellings. But, it pales in comparison to the Description category.

This ties into the biggest finding of this story, how many AR15s have been stolen in Columbia? To be brief: 45 AR15 pattern rifles have been stolen in Columbia but you wouldn’t know that if you looked at the original data. Here is why.

So the AR-15 stands for Armalite Rifle model 15. The original AR-15 was made in the late 1950s—it was a successor to the AR-10 that basically was the same rifle but bigger. Armalite won a contract to have the AR-15 be the new service weapon for the U.S. military—but the U.S. wanted an AR-15 that was fully automatic. So, they made a new one and called it the M16. Armalite was going broke at the time they won the contract so they sold the patent to Colt—who then mass produced it for the military and licensed it out to hundreds of manufacturers.

Real. Genuine Armalite made AR-15s are hard to come by—but plenty of other brands make AR-15s. Some even bought the rights to the name to help with marketing their version. This may seem like a lot but it is important.

The only reasons I know that 45 “AR-15s” have been stolen is because of the cleaning and checking I did for the dataset.

Smith & Wesson makes an AR-15. They calls theirs the M&P15. It is arguably the cheapest and most poorly made AR-15 on the market—it has also been used in a variety of mass shootings. Bushmaster, another brand makes an AR-15 that they call the XM15 (original right?). DPMS makes an AR-15 that they call the “Panther.” All of these are listed in the data. The only reason you would know they are all AR-15 is because I edited the Description category.

Originally, the Description category was a mess. Sometimes it was blank, some times it was the model column repeated—most of the time however it just said: Firearm. Helpful right? In order to figure out how many AR-15s for example were in the locker—I decided to make new sub categories for the Description category. They are as follows: AK, AK\_Pistol, AR PISTOL, AR10, AR15, HANDGUN, REVOLVER, RIFLE\_B, RIFLE\_L, RIFLE\_S and SHOTGUN.

I did this in order to more easily differentiate between what kind of firearms were in the locker. That way, you can easily see which guns are “AR15s” when they are bunched together—so the end result thus far looks like this entry for example: 4/14/19 15:19 – 2019003650 – STOLEN – BUSHMASTER – XM15 – AR15. The same things goes for AK like rifles. AKs are made by a variety of arms manufacturers—that is why I made a AK sub category.

The AK\_Pistol & AR Pistol categories are simply put—rifles that have barrels that are less than 16 inches that also have a pistol brace not a stock—so technically under the Federal Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms they are in fact pistols. That is what those two categories mean.

AR10: Is just a AR15 but bigger essentially. An AR10 pattern rifle shoots a full-size rifles cartridge unlike AR15 pattern rifles that fire an-intermediate cartridge.

HANDGUN: This was basically the catch all term for all pistols that were not revolvers, whether they were striker or hammer-fired (two kinds of actions)—they are under the HANDGUN category.

REVOLVER: This was for all of the cylinder fire pistols (revolvers)—think the guns you see in western movies.

RIFLE\_B: this is where it got complicated. So rifles come in a variety of models, semi-automatic, bolt-action, lever-action, single-shot, etc. Bolt-action rifles are typically used for hunting but their origins in their design date back to WWI. So, I made all guns in the locker that were bolt-action go under RIFLE\_B.

RIFLE\_L: This is a category for rifles that have a lever action to load them. They were more common in the late 1800s and early 1900s but plenty of people still use them for hunting. There were less than five in the locker but I made this a category nonetheless.

RIFLE\_S: So, the AR15 and the AK pattern rifles are semi-automatic. We see them a lot on the news: but they only represent a fraction of some 50 million semi-automatic rifles in the United States. This category was for all rifles that were semi-automatic but weren’t AKs or AR15s. There weren’t that many—but I felt that since I already broke down the other kinds of rifles I should do the same for this sub-section.

SHOTGUN: Well, it is for shotguns—or guns that fire a shot from a shotshell if you want to be technical. These are very common in law enforcement, hunting, home defense, recreational shootings—just about everything. There were quite a few in the data—which didn’t really surprise me.

So, with that out of the way—one can easily see just how many handguns for example are in the locker. This led to the most important and overlooked category in my opinion when it comes to reporting on gun violence: the caliber of the firearm.

In total these were the different calibers in the locker: .243 (.243), .25 ACP (.25), .270 winchester (.270), .308 winchester (.308), .32 ACP (.32), .357 magnum (.357), .380 Auto (.38), .40 S&W (.40), .45 ACP (.45), .50 cal (.5), 5.56x45 or .223 Remington (.556), 9mm Luger (9.0), 10mm Auto (.10), 30-30 (3030.0), .22 Long Rifle (.22LR), .300 Blackout (.300 blck), .32 S&W (.32sw), .357 Sig (.357s), .38 Special (.38 spl), .44 Magnum (.44mag), .45 Longcolt (.45LC), 12 Gauge (12GA), 20 Gauge (20GA), 7.62 Tokarov (7.62T), 7.62x39 (7.62x39), 7mm Mauser (7mm), and 9mm Russian (9r). So that is nearly 30 different kinds of calibers in these guns.

To simplify this—I made the final category called TYPE. This category was not included with the original data. It also does not affect the data. Basically, it takes the BRAND, MODEL, DESCRIPTION and CALIBER info and gives you a letter or short abbreviation.

The abbreviations are as follows: B, L, P, R, SG, SR and SRP.

B: stands for bolt-action rifle.

L: Lever-action rifle.

P: Pistol, includes revolvers and handguns.

SG: Shotgun—literally all shotguns.

SR: Semi-automatic Rifle (all encompassing).

SRP: Semi-automatic Rifle Pistol (those pistol/rifle guns I mentioned earlier).

This last category, in my own words, is the most watered-down definition of what each gun is. These categories are as basic as they get but for someone who doesn’t know a lot about guns, I feel that they can be helpful.

I’ve worked with this kind of data in the past—I wrote about 5 years worth of Missouri Trace [requests through the ATF for *The Missourian*](https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/local/gun-violence-in-missouri-becoming-a-disease-of-youth/article_d2df6958-5d4d-11e9-9faf-b7d31633246a.html)*.* So, this is by no means my first time working with guns. I also hint at it later and go into it but I am actually making a resource for *Missourian* reporters—it is my guide go covering guns—it will be a website and a PDF. The actual rough website is actually already online! I link to it later on in this document. It uses HTML, CSS, Javascript and even a little bit of Python. I wanted to leave the newsroom with something that I think can sort of replace my knowledge after I graduate in December.

**Audit Trail (C.)**

Question 1: How can we best order the guns in the evidence locker by brand.

Pretty simple: use this statement

SELECT brand, Model

FROM CPDEvidence

Order By brand

You should get 754 entries in total. This view was saved as “AllOrderBrand” in the sequel file.

Question 2: What was the most common brand found in the evidence locker?

There are a couple ways to do this. I used this input.

SELECT Brand, count()

FROM CPDEvidence

Group By Brand

Order By count ()

This will order the brands and the guns by the amount of times they show up in the dataset. If you scroll to the bottom—or 112th entry—you’ll see that S&W, short for Smith & Wesson appears the most (113) entries in the evidence locker. This was saved as “BrandCountOrder.”

Question 3: Glocks are an incredibly common brand of handgun. How many were there in the locker?

SELECT Brand, count()

FROM CPDEvidence

Where brand like "Glock"

Lucky for us. I cleaned the data already so to account for all Glock brand handguns you just have to use “Glock” and the above code. In total, 98 Glock made handguns were in the locker.

Question 4: What was the spread, or what was the breakdown of the different kind of calibers in the locker? In other words, how many different calibers were in the locker?

SELECT Caliber, count()

FROM CPDEvidence

Group By Caliber

If you include the three null entries, in total there are 30 different calibers represented in the locker.

Question 5: 9mm is an incredibly common caliber used for self-defense, law enforcement and the military. How many firearms in the locker were in 9mm?

SELECT Caliber, count()

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Caliber like 9.0

So, out of the roughly 770 firearms in the evidence locker—306 are in 9mm. But where all of these firearms in 9mm handguns?

Question 6: What was the breakdown of the 9mm firearms in CPDs possession?

SELECT Caliber, count(), Descrip

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Caliber like 9.0

Group By Descrip

Using the above, we find out that 3 were actually semi-automatic rifles, 4 were AR Pistols, and 299 were handguns. So, the idea that 9mm is mostly used for handguns, at least with this batch of firearms seems consistent.

Question 7: So just how many AR15s were in the locker? Remember the question I presented in the beginning?

SELECT count(), Descrip

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Descrip like "AR15"

So, 46 AR15s are in the evidence locker.

Question 8: How many of these AR15s were specifically for “EVIDENCE.”

SELECT Reason, count(), Descrip

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Descrip like "AR15" and REASON like "EVIDENCE"

12, 12 AR15s were for evidence. While this doesn’t tell us everything—we can also find out how many were stolen.

Question 9: How many AR15s were specifically for “STOLEN”

SELECT Reason, count(), Descrip

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Descrip like "AR15" and REASON like "STOLEN"

So, specifically, 26 AR15s are marked as stolen—but as we know from our definition—"evidence” firearms can be stolen as well.

Question 10: How many AR15s were specifically “STOLEN” or “EVIDENCE”?

SELECT Reason, count(), Descrip

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Descrip like "AR15" and REASON like "STOLEN" or DESCRIP like "AR15" and REASON like "EVIDENCE"

So in total 38 AR15s were either listed as “STOLEN” or “EVIDENCE”

Question 11: The previous question begs this question—what was the breakdown of the total amount of AR15s in the locker – why were they there?

SELECT Reason, count(), Descrip

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Descrip like "AR15"

Group by Reason

So, 12 were for evidence. 4 were recovered. 1 was seized. 26 were stolen. 3 were stolen/recovered. That’s a lot of AR15s just floating around in Columbia.

Question 12: What about those AR\_Pistols that I mentioned? How many of them were in the locker? Also Why were the AR Pistols there in the first place?

SELECT Reason, count(), Descrip

FROM CPDEvidence

Where Descrip like "AR Pistol"

This code tells us just that. 5 AR Pistols were in the locker. All 5 were stolen.

**F. Possible Experts**

1. Alain Stephens who works with for *The Trace.* He is a “gun guy” as well and is in fact from Dallas Texas just like me. He specializes in covering all things firearms, along with how they are made illegally and legally in the United States. I’ve spoken to him before via Zoom once in a class and once outside of the class. I know he is aware of this story.

2. Lakeidra Chavis is another reporter with *The Trace.* That being said, she is specifically their Midwest correspondent. I’d specifically want to ask her about the trends I see in the CPD locker. Maybe it is representative of the region? Maybe it isn’t?

3. [John E. Ham](https://www.atf.gov/kansas-city-field-division). So, Ham is the PIO for the Kansas City Field Division of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. I’ve quoted him in the past during an investigative piece I did last year about the increase in gun violence among minors. I’d like to help him clarify why records for firearms between departments varies so much. Obviously, in CPD’s records alone there is quite the variance in terminology—I literally had to make an extra category to read the data.

**G. A list of what I need to do**

To be honest, the hardest part about this data set is trying to figure out which way I’d pitch it. You could in fact pitch multiple stories from this data. For example, more than 20 guns were stolen from Tiger Pawn in June of last year. Those guns were recovered by law enforcement but they declined to tell us what they actually were. I found out what the guns were by simply cross referencing the incident number date of when they were recovered which we knew from a press release with the dates in the locker (2019006528 – that is the incident number – from the data for the guns in question).

The story could also be about the stolen AR15s in general. We can easily find out where they were stolen from specifically by filling out a records request for the incident numbers attached to them. It isn’t exactly hard to do and Lydia Green (CPD records keeper) has done this for me in the past for free sometimes if you give her enough time.

What I’m trying to get at is the bulk of more than three potential stories is done. Getting, cleaning and analyzing the data was the hard part—now we just have to publish something. I have pitched a general overview story of the locker to Katherine Reed called *“What Lives in the Evidence Locker”* (title pending change). I also am making a free web resource (website) for my design class that is basically a reporter guide to covering guns and gun terminology—maybe I can incorporate part of this as a sort of tutorial or step by step thing so new reporters won’t have to go in blind. What I’m saying is I’m 99% certain this work will publish in some form—just not by the deadline on the syllabus which is totally fine by me. I just don’t want this work to go to waste because I think this is kind of handy and the process could be replicated at different police departments. So cost wise, I already paid for the data in question it was $20.92 so not too bad for a couple potential stories. Here is a link to the mockup of the website I made/am working on-- <https://j4502-fs20.github.io/Hunter-s-Site-2.0/index.html> .

I’m trying to incorporate some Javascript and Python into two separate subsections. The CSS and HTML is good enough (for now).

**Other Resources (E.)**

1. <https://www.texastribune.org/2013/08/25/law-enforcement-permitted-sell-confiscated-guns/> So this story is linked on the IRE website if you search “guns.” Obviously that leads to a ton of results. That being said this specific article looks at how law enforcement can sell firearms that are in their evidence locker after cases are complete. There is a very obvious tie in to my story and this one.
2. <https://www.startribune.com/part-2-one-stolen-gun-blazes-violent-path/199468241/> Found this story by looking through IRE via the search portal as well. This story is about stolen guns in Minnesota. They actually traced several guns as well but through a more specific method. Rather than asking for the whole locker—these reporters requested info pertaining to several specific guns.
3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/nation/guns/part4.html> So this is an older story through the *Washington Post*. In this case, they traced a specific gun used to kill an officer while also looking at various ways officers in the D.C. area had been killed via firearms.
4. <https://www.ire.org/resource-center/tipsheets/1321/> So this tipsheet from 2000 on the IRE website was an older example of how-to reporters can look into and trace firearms used in crimes. It is kind of out of date. But, it shows that this has been a subject for at least 20 years.
5. <https://www.ire.org/resource-center/tipsheets/1140/> So this is also from 2000, it is a four page guide to covering guns that honestly leaves a lot to ask for—that being said the website I am working on will be a good modern replacement to this.
6. <https://www.ire.org/product/federal-firearms-explosives-licensees> So this is like the catch all for looking into Federal Firearms/Explosives Licensees—essentially anyone that sales a gun for profit has to have one of these. This tipsheet helps explain lots of the basics but it hasn’t been updated since 2013.
7. <https://ire.org/resource-center/stories/15828/> Also found through IRE, this story from 1999 did a great job of tracking down how the Columbine shooters got their actual guns. While the focus of my story is more than just shootings, for example I am looking into stolen guns, this is a good example of how one can track down specific guns and use Federal records request.

Left to do

Problems, Citation, Original files, Slideshow, analyses files,