

Young Men, Cheap Guns, and the 1960s and 1970s Crime Wave



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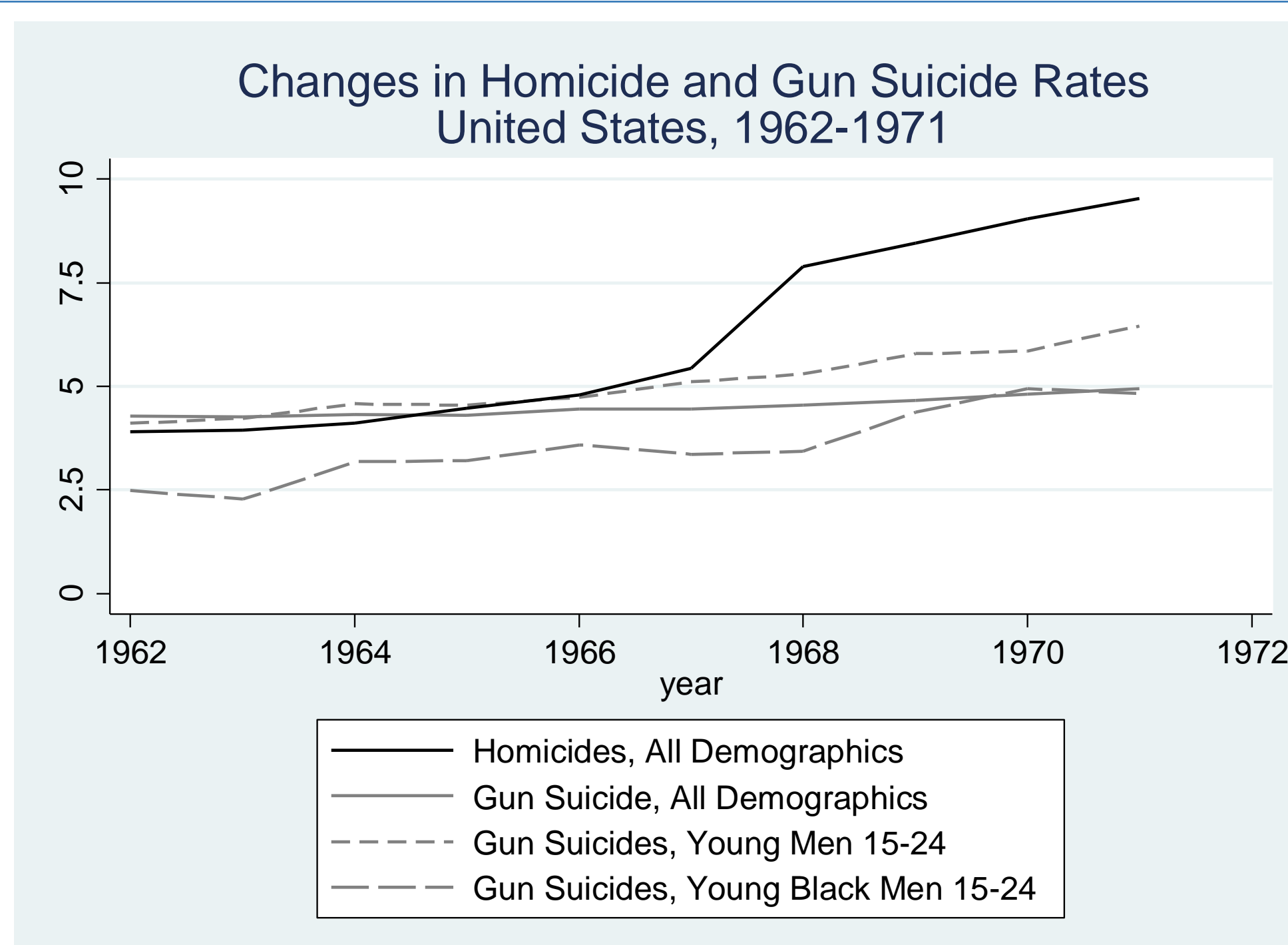
Abstract

From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, all measures of violent crime including homicides went up by more than 100% within the United States. While previous researchers have noted that gun sales and gun crimes increased in this period, relatively little attention has been focused on the fall in handgun prices that occurred in this period. We present a range of evidence suggesting that increases in the supply of cheap handguns led to increases in gun violence and gun homicides. In particular, the Gun Control Act of 1968 led to a temporary fall in the supply of handguns, and appears to have led to temporary slowing or reversing of gun violence across the United States.

Introduction

The increase in crime in the United States from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s was striking and seems to have had long term impacts on criminal justice policies, social policies, and domestic US politics ever since.^{1, 2, 3}

Although it received some commentary at the time the increase in handgun sales and gun violence that occurred at roughly the same time was generally understood to be demand driven – “the best index of demand for urban self-defense.”¹



Handgun Access Among Young Men

There is a strong relationship between gun suicide rates for young males (this is strongly correlated with, but less noisy than, fraction of suicides committed by firearms, a standard proxy for gun ownership/access) and overall homicide rates, as can be seen in the above figure and the regression results below.

The increase slightly precedes the increases in homicides, and is strongly significant in regressions using county-level data. A one standard deviation increase in gun suicides among young men is associated with an increase in all homicides of 1/15th of a standard deviation.

Dependent Variable: Δ Homicide Rate All Demographics	All Counties	Metro	Non-Metro
Δ Gun Suicide Rate, Young Men	0.0118	0.0215	0.0116
Cluster robust standard errors	(0.0037)	(0.0083)	(0.0038)

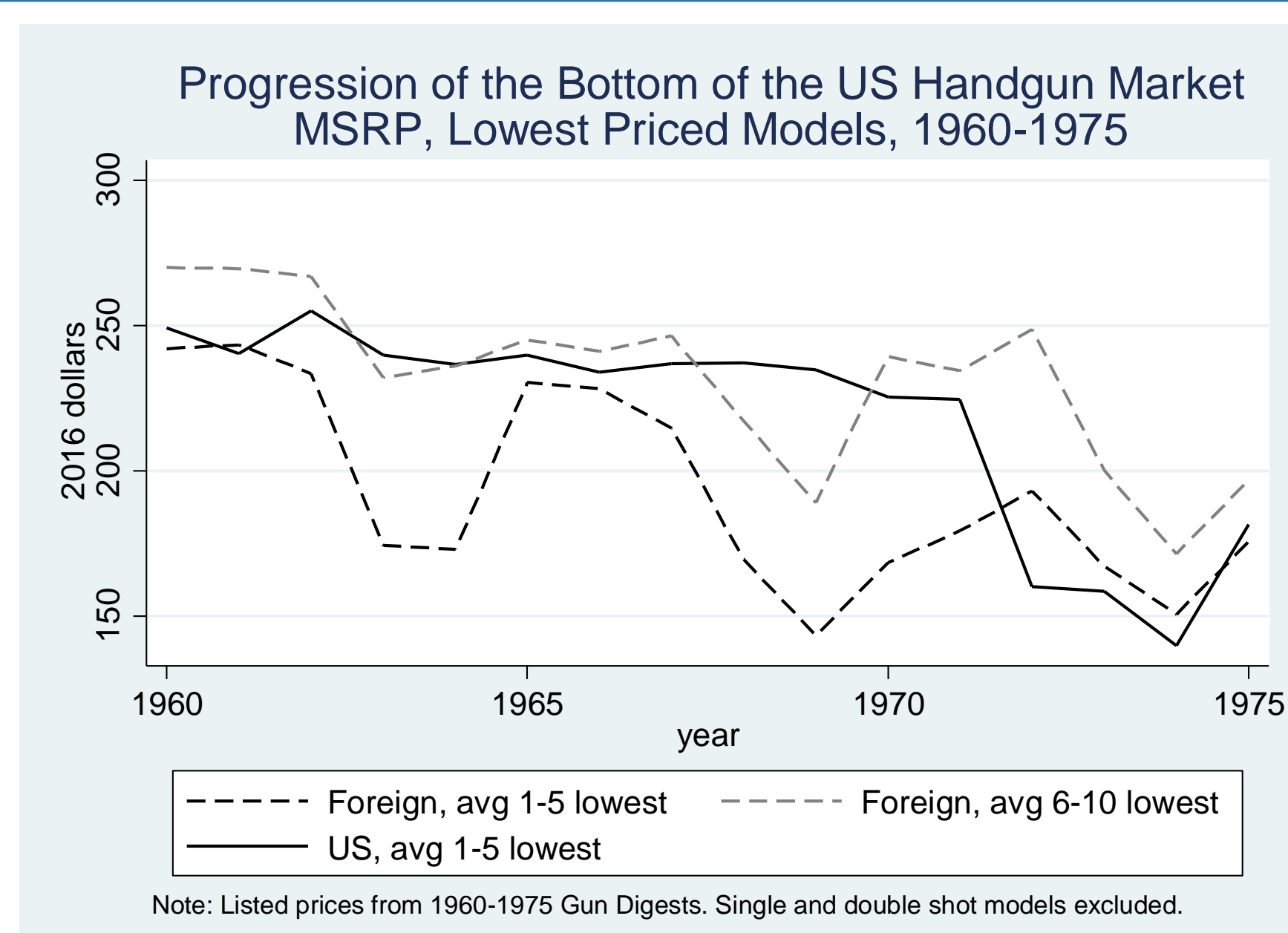
Data for 1962-1975 at county level.

All regressions use county, year and region/year fixed effects, and basic demographic controls

Increase in the Supply of Cheap Handguns

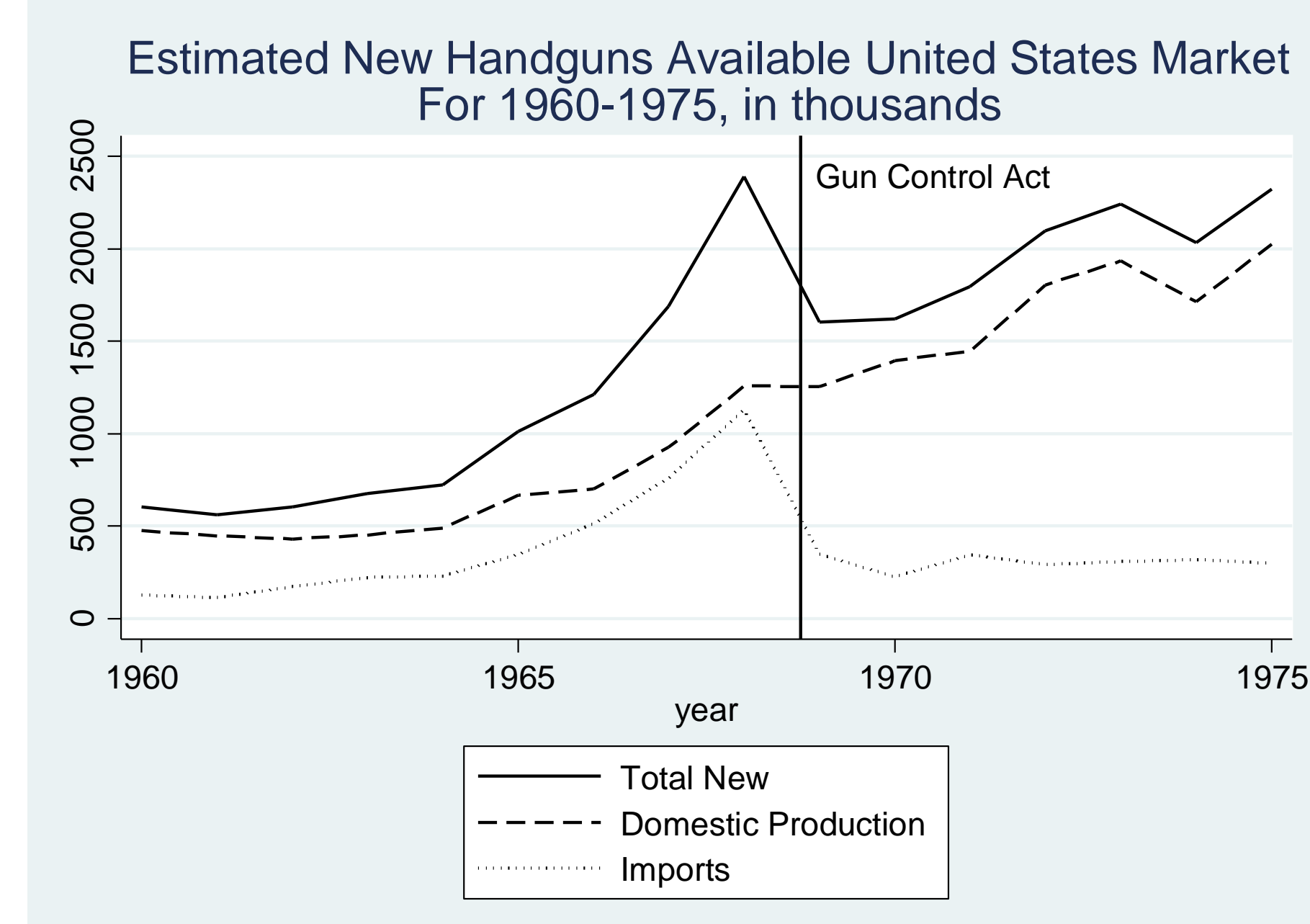
Although it is possible that the increase in gun purchases and access among young men was driven by increased demand, the prices of handguns at the bottom of the market were falling considerably in this period, suggesting a positive supply shock.

In the early 1960s, gun imports from around the world, but particularly West Germany, Italy, Spain and Brazil, increased rapidly.



Note: Listed prices from 1960-1975 Gun Digests. Single and double shot models excluded.

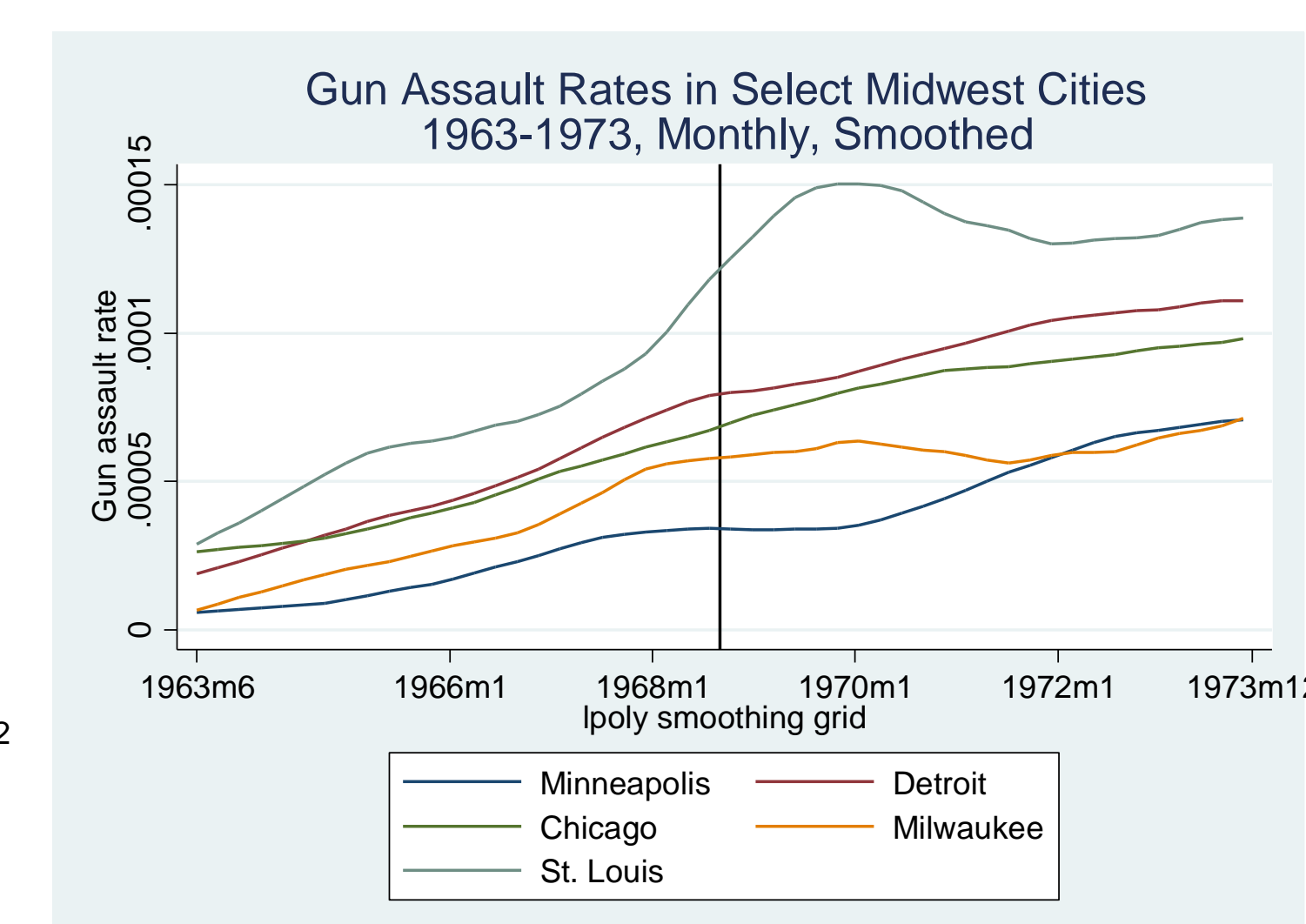
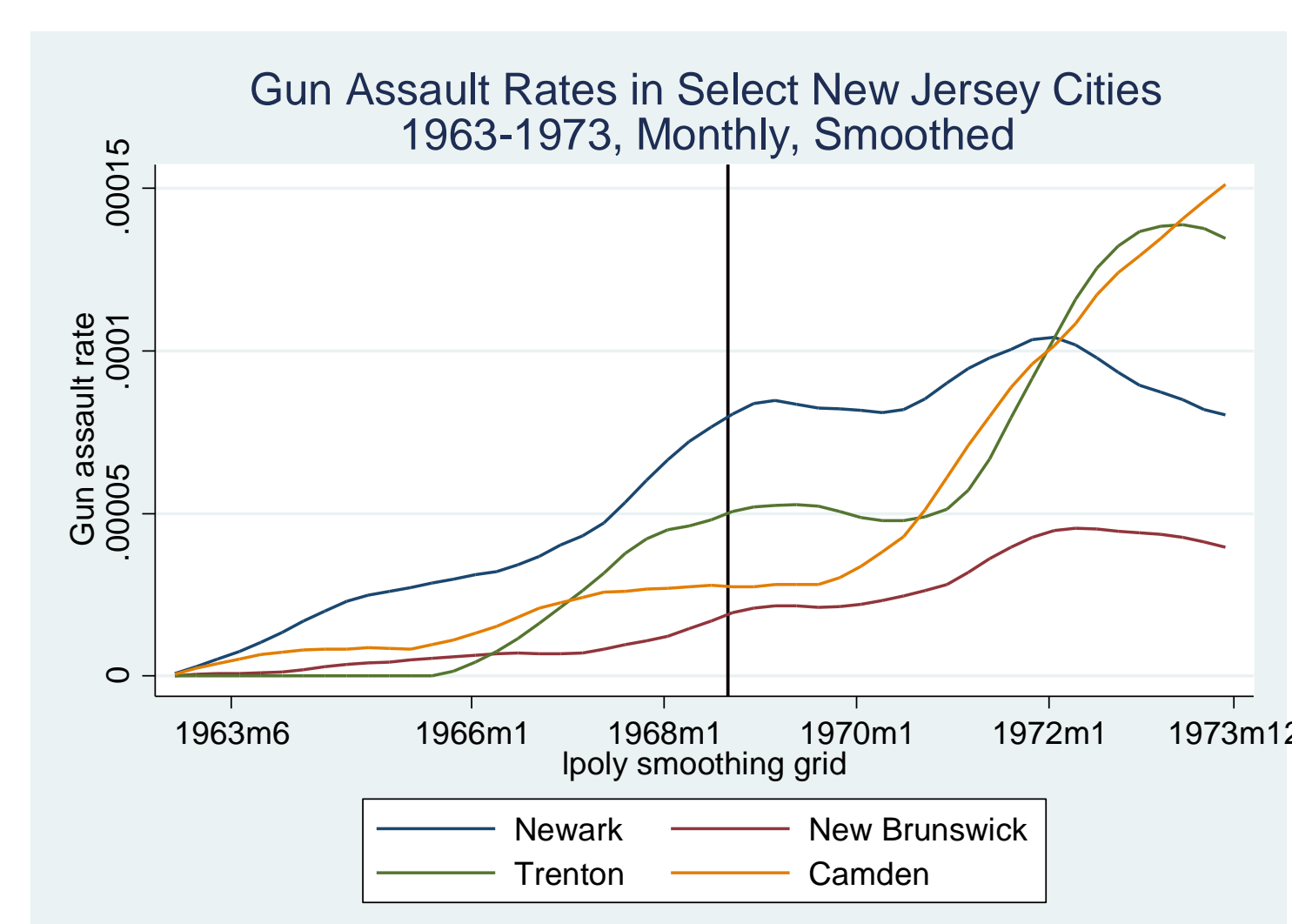
There is also evidence of significantly more competition in imports than in domestic manufacture: Up to 1970, two brands, Iver Johnson and Harrington & Richardson represent effectively all cheap domestic handgun sales. However, numerous brands move into and out of the bottom of the import category: Astra, Bernardelli, Herter's, Armi Galesi, Llama, Mercury, Beretta, Mykros, LA distributors (Debuty and LA Fury brands) among them



The Gun Control Act of 1968

The Gun Control Act of 1968 limited imports of guns except for those “generally recognized as particularly suitable for or readily adaptable to sporting purposes.”¹ The legal text was ambiguous, but in practice, there was an immediate fall in handgun imports, as can be seen in the graph above (monthly data shows an even stronger effect).

The drastic fall in supply of new handguns appears to be linked to temporary falls in gun violence and crime across the US. It can be most clearly seen in the changes in monthly gun assault rates, which for many cities stall or dip at some point in the 24 months after October 1968. The two graphs below show the effect in New Jersey cities, and in the Midwest.



Conclusions

The increase in violent crime and homicide from 1965 to 1972 is coincident with a general fall in handgun prices, a large increase in handguns sold and an increase in measures of gun access among young males. The fall in prices among models at the bottom of the market is strongly suggestive of a positive supply shock.

Additional insight is provided by the two-year reduction in handgun supply caused by the Gun Control Act of 1968. Measures of gun violence and gun crime paused or dipped noticeably in numerous American cities in the immediate wake of the GCA. We are beginning to explore the identification possibilities of this pattern.

Combined, this suggests that changes in the supply of handguns, particularly cheap handguns, may induce changes in violence levels.

References

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