

PRIMER



FIREARMS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this primer is to provide a general overview of the major statutes, sentencing guidelines, issues, and case law relating to firearms offenses and enhancements for possession or use of firearms related to other offenses. Although the primer identifies some applicable cases and concepts, it is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of issues relating to all issues of federal firearms law and sentencing.

II. RELEVANT STATUTES

A. SUBSTANTIVE OFFENSES

1. *Firearms Transfer Offenses: 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(a)(6) (“straw purchase”), 922(d) (“prohibited person”), 924(a)(1)(A) (“false statement in a record”), 1715 (“firearms as nonmailable”)*

Section 922(a)(6) makes it unlawful for any person in connection with the acquisition, or attempt to acquire, any firearm or ammunition from a licensed dealer to knowingly make any false oral or written statement intended or likely to deceive the dealer with respect to any fact material to the lawfulness of the sale or other disposition of such firearm or ammunition under any provision of 18 U.S.C. §§ 921 *et seq.* A violation of section 922(a)(6) is punishable by a statutory maximum term of imprisonment of ten years.

Section 922(d) makes it unlawful for any person to sell or dispose of any firearm or ammunition to any person knowing or having reason to believe that such person:

- (1) is under indictment or been convicted of a felony;
- (2) is a fugitive from justice;
- (3) abuses any controlled substance;
- (4) has been adjudicated as suffering from mental health issues;
- (5) is an (A) illegal alien or (B) an alien admitted under a non-immigrant visa;¹
- (6) has been dishonorably discharged from the Armed Forces;
- (7) has renounced his or her United States citizenship;

¹ The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) is charged with promulgating regulations pertaining to § 922. Where the statute is silent as to the meaning of a term, a court will defer to the ATF’s regulations at 27 C.F.R §§ 478 *et seq.* See, e.g., *United States v. Anaya-Acosta*, 629 F.3d 1091, 1094 (9th Cir. 2011) (using the meaning of “illegally or unlawfully in the United States” at 27 C.F.R. § 478.11 to interpret § 922(g)(5)(A)).

- (8) is subject to a restraining court order prohibiting harassing, stalking, or threatening an intimate partner or child; or
- (9) has been previously convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence.

A violation of section 922(d) is punishable by a statutory maximum term of imprisonment of ten years.

Section 924(a)(1)(A) makes it unlawful to knowingly make any false statement or representation with respect to the information required by the provisions of 18 U.S.C. §§ 921 *et seq.* to be kept in the records of a person licensed under the same said provisions or in applying for any license or exemption or relief from disability under those same provisions. A violation of section 924(a)(1)(A) is punishable by a statutory maximum term of imprisonment of five years.

Section 1715 makes it unlawful to knowingly deposit for mailing or delivery any pistols, revolvers, and other firearms capable of being concealed on the person. A violation of section 1715 is punishable by a statutory maximum term of imprisonment of two years.

The guideline applicable to §§ 922(a)(1), 922(d), 924(a)(1)(A), and 1715 offenses is §2K2.1 (Unlawful Receipt, Possession, or Transportation of Firearms or Ammunition; Prohibited Transactions Involving Firearms or Ammunition). *See* USSG Appendix A (Statutory Index).

Issue—When 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(a)(6), 922(d), or 924(a)(1)(A) are charged:

Some overlap appears to exist with the conduct covered under the three offenses. The following discussion includes examples of case law where a specific statute is charged. False statements on ATF Form 4473 - Firearms Transaction Record, the form required to lawfully transfer a firearm from a federally licensed dealer, will trigger prosecution.² A common offense charged under section 922(a)(6) is the “straw purchase,” which entails a material misrepresentation as to the identity of the actual firearm purchaser.³ In *Abramski*

² *See* United States v. Banks, 514 F.3d 769, 778 (8th Cir. 2008) (“Unlike other businesses, a firearms dealer is required to record all of its sales on Form 4473.”) (citing 27 C.F.R. § 478.124(a)).

³ *See, e.g.,* United States v. Frazier, 605 F.3d 1271, 1280 (11th Cir. 2010) (“[W]e find the act of falsifying the identity of the ‘actual buyer’ on Form 4473 to be a violation of § 922(a)(6).”); United States v. Blake, 394 F.3d 1089, 1090 (8th Cir. 2005) (purchasing firearms on behalf of another for “some quick money” is a “straw purchase”); *United States v. Ortiz*, 318 F.3d 1030, 1037 (11th Cir. 2003) (“‘straw purchases’ equally misrepresent the identity of the purchaser in a firearm sale and violate 18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(6)” and occur when an unlawful purchaser uses a lawful “straw man” purchaser to obtain a firearm); *see also* ATF Form 4473, Question 11.a. (“Warning: You are not the actual transferee/buyer if you are acquiring the firearm(s) on behalf of another person. If you are not the actual transferee/buyer, the dealer cannot transfer the firearm(s) to you.”).

v. United States, the Supreme Court held that the true identity of the purchaser of a firearm is a material fact under 18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(6) even when the true purchaser is legally eligible to acquire a firearm.⁴ The Court's decision resolved a circuit split concerning section 922(a)(6)'s materiality requirement in favor of the Fourth, Sixth, and Eleventh Circuits, and contrary to the Fifth Circuit's position.⁵ Although frequently charged in such cases, section 922(a)(6) on its face does not prohibit straw purchases,⁶ and section 924(a)(1)(A) may be charged instead.⁷

In 2011, subsections (a)(4)(B) and (a)(6) of §2K2.1 were amended to increase penalties for a defendant who is convicted under 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(a)(6) or 924(a)(1)(A) and committed the offense with knowledge, intent, or reason to believe that the offense would result in the transfer of a firearm or ammunition to a prohibited person.⁸ The amendment ensures that defendants convicted under 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(a)(6) or 924(a)(1)(A) receive the same punishment as defendants convicted under 18 U.S.C. § 922(d) when the conduct is similar. In addition, the amendment provided a new Application Note 15 stating that, in a case in which the defendant is convicted under any of the three statutes, a downward departure may be warranted if (A) none of the enhancements in subsection (b) of §2K2.1 apply, (B) the defendant was motivated by an intimate or familial relationship or by threats or fear to commit the offense and was otherwise unlikely to commit such an offense, and (C) the defendant received no monetary compensation from the offense. A defendant meeting these criteria is generally less culpable than the typical straw purchaser.

The firearm purchaser's place of residence is a material fact; an incorrect street address on Form 4473 is a section 922(a)(6) violation.⁹

⁴ 134 S. Ct. 2259 (2014).

⁵ Compare *United States v. Abramski*, 706 F.3d 307 (4th Cir. 2013); *United States v. Morales*, 687 F.3d 697, 700–701 (6th Cir. 2012) (a misrepresentation about the true purchaser's identity is material even when he can legally own a gun); *United States v. Frazier*, 605 F.3d 1271, 1279–1280 (11th Cir. 2010) (same) with *United States v. Polk*, 118 F.3d 286, 295 (5th Cir. 1997).

⁶ See *Abramski*, 134 S. Ct. at 2270.

⁷ See *United States v. Wilson*, 175 F. App'x 294 (11th Cir. 2006) (*per curiam*) (finding that falsely claiming on Form 4473 to be the actual purchaser of the firearm is a violation of section 924(a)(1)(A)).

⁸ See USSG App. C, amend. 753 (Nov. 1, 2011).

⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Bolwing*, 770 F.3d 1168, 1177–78 (7th Cir. 2014) (stating a false address can be material misrepresentation and a violation of section 922(a)(6)); *United States v. Gudger*, 472 F.2d 566 (5th Cir. 1972) (same); *United States v. Behenna*, 552 F.2d 573, 575–76 (4th Cir. 1977) (same); *United States v. Buck*, 548 F.2d 871, 876 (9th Cir. 1977) (same); *United States v. Crandall*, 453 F.2d 1216 (1st Cir. 1972) (same).

Note also that the defendant's intent may also be a factor considered when charging section 922(a)(6) because it is a general intent crime and therefore the government is relieved from proving that the defendant specifically intended to violate a federal law.¹⁰

Violations of section 922(d) occur when a prohibited person acquires a firearm or when a person transfers a firearm knowing or having a reasonable cause to believe the person is prohibited from acquiring it. Typically, the offense involves the transfer of a firearm to a convicted felon.¹¹ Section 922(d) may also be charged in cases where a firearm purchaser makes a false misrepresentation on Form 4473. Each of the nine circumstances enumerated in section 922(d) are listed on Form 4473 at Questions 11.b.-l. and 12, and the transferee must affirmatively state whether any are applicable. A false answer to a question may result in prosecution under section 922(d).

Section 924(a)(1)(A) may also be charged when a person provides false responses to questions on Form 4473. Examples of district court cases include the purchase of a firearm after conviction for a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence,¹² and counseling another person to falsely state that she was the transferee/buyer of a firearm.¹³ However, as previously noted, section 924(a)(1)(A) is sometimes charged in "straw purchase" cases.¹⁴ The penalty for a violation of section 922(a)(6) is up to ten years' imprisonment, while a violation of section 924(a)(1)(A) is up to five years. Charging section 922(a)(6) in lieu of section 924(a)(1)(A) may be based upon the surrounding circumstances or seriousness of conduct in the case.

2. 18 U.S.C. § 922(g) - Prohibited Persons ("Felon-in-Possession")

This subsection bans specified classes of people from transporting or possessing in interstate or foreign commerce any firearm or ammunition or from receiving any firearm or ammunition that has been transported in interstate or foreign commerce. The banned

¹⁰ See, e.g., *United States v. Edgerton*, 510 F.3d 54, 57 (1st Cir. 2007) ("Section 922(a)(6) . . . does not presuppose deceptive intent or even knowledge that one's conduct is unlawful"); *United States v. Elias*, 937 F.2d 1514, 1518 (10th Cir. 1991) ("[T]he phrase 'likely to deceive' in section 922(a)(6) does not establish a specific intent element but only requires proof the defendant imparted false information with the general intention of deceiving or being likely to deceive the dealer.").

¹¹ See, e.g., *United States v. Dotson*, 570 F.3d 1067 (8th Cir. 2009) (attempting to transfer a firearm to a convicted felon is a violation of section 922(d)(1)); *United States v. Rose*, 522 F.3d 710 (6th Cir. 2008) (selling a firearm to a convicted felon is a violation of §§ 922(d)(1) and 924(a)(2)); *United States v. Peters*, 403 F.3d 1263 (11th Cir. 2005) (same). See also the discussion of 18 U.S.C. § 922(g), prohibiting possession of a firearm by a felon, *infra* at II(A)(2).

¹² See *United States v. Tooley*, 717 F. Supp. 2d 580 (S.D.W. Va. 2010).

¹³ See *United States v. Sanelli*, 2010 WL 1608416 (W.D. Va. Apr. 20, 2010).

¹⁴ See *United States v. Torres*, 2010 WL 3190659 (D. Ariz. June 21, 2010).

classes include: convicted felons; fugitives; unlawful users of controlled substances; adjudicated “mental defectives”; illegal aliens; dishonorably discharged service personnel; those who have renounced their U.S. citizenship; and misdemeanor domestic violence offenders or those subject to certain restraining orders in domestic violence matters. The statutory maximum penalty for the offense is ten years of imprisonment.

The guideline applicable to section 922(g) offenses is §2K2.1 (Unlawful Receipt, Possession, or Transportation of Firearms or Ammunition; Prohibited Transactions Involving Firearms or Ammunition).¹⁵

Issue—Multiplicity in the Charging Instrument:

One set of issues that has arisen since the enactment of section 922(g) relates to multiplicity: what if the defendant is considered a “banned person” under more than one of the categories listed above? In *United States v. Richardson*, the *en banc* Eighth Circuit held “that Congress intended the ‘allowable unit of prosecution’ to be an incident of possession regardless of whether a defendant satisfied more than one § 922(g) classification, possessed more than one firearm, or possessed a firearm and ammunition.”¹⁶ In so doing, the Eighth Circuit reversed earlier circuit precedent and joined every other circuit to address the issue. For example, in *United States v. Winchester*, the defendant was convicted and sentenced for violations of sections 922(g)(1) (felon in possession) and (g)(2) (fugitive from justice in possession), arising out of the possession of a single firearm.¹⁷ The court found the convictions multiplicitous, concluding that, in enacting section 922(g), it was not within Congress’s comprehension or intention that a person could be sentenced, for a single incident, under more than one of the subdivisions of section 922(g). In *United States v. Munoz-Romo*, the Fifth Circuit agreed with *Winchester*.¹⁸ Although the Fifth Circuit had originally upheld multiple sentences under various subsections of section 922(g), defendant filed a petition for writ of certiorari and, in response, the Solicitor General of the United States changed positions and urged that the case be remanded for dismissal of one of the counts. The Supreme Court granted certiorari, vacated the judgment, and remanded for further consideration in light of the position asserted by the Solicitor General. On remand, the Fifth Circuit concluded that Congress, by rooting all the firearm possession offenses in a single legislative enactment and including all the offenses in subsections of the

¹⁵ See USSG Appendix A (Statutory Index).

¹⁶ 439 F.3d 421 (8th Cir. 2006).

¹⁷ 916 F.2d 601 (11th Cir. 1990).

¹⁸ 989 F.2d 757 (5th Cir. 1993).

same statute, signaled that it did not intend multiple punishments for the possession of a single weapon.¹⁹

A related set of issues, to which a similar analysis applies, arises in situations in which a defendant possesses multiple firearms or firearms and ammunition. Most courts have held that possession of more than one firearm and ammunition by a prohibited person generally supports only one conviction under 18 U.S.C. § 922(g). Courts have noted that the prohibited conduct, possession of any firearm or ammunition, could arguably occur every time a disqualified person picks up a firearm even though it is the same firearm or every time a disqualified person picks up a different firearm. “The [statute] does not delineate whether possession of two firearms—say two six-shooters in a holster—constitutes one or two violations, whether the possession of a firearm loaded with one bullet constitutes one or two violations, or whether possession of a six-shooter loaded with six bullets constitutes one or two or seven violations.”²⁰

However, this general rule is subject to exceptions: where the evidence demonstrates that the defendant stored the weapons in different places or acquired the weapons at different times, he can be convicted of multiple counts of illegal possession.²¹ The Eighth Circuit, for example, has clarified that its holding in *Richardson* does not mean that “any period of overlap” in the possession of two firearms means that only one possession conviction may be obtained; rather, the question is “whether the two items were separately acquired or stored.”²²

From a procedural standpoint, this general rule does not preclude the *charging* of multiple counts, only convictions. As the Supreme Court in *Ball v. United States* explained: “To say that a convicted felon may be prosecuted simultaneously for violation of [two

¹⁹ *Accord* United States v. Parker, 508 F.3d 434, 440 (7th Cir. 2007); United States v. Shea, 211 F.3d 658, 673 (1st Cir. 2000); United States v. Dunford, 148 F.3d 385, 389 (4th Cir. 1998); United States v. Johnson, 130 F.3d 1420, 1426 (10th Cir. 1997).

²⁰ United States v. Dunford, 148 F.3d 385, 389 (4th Cir. 1998) (reversing all but one conviction where defendant possessed six firearms and ammunition); *see also* United States v. Olmeda, 461 F.3d 271, 280 (2d Cir. 2006); United States v. Verrecchia, 196 F.3d 294, 297–98 (1st Cir. 1999); United States v. Cunningham, 145 F.3d 1385, 1398–99 (D.C. Cir. 1998); United States v. Keen, 104 F.3d 1111, 1119–20 (9th Cir. 1996); United States v. Throneburg, 921 F.2d 654, 657 (6th Cir. 1990); United States v. Pelusio, 725 F.2d 161, 168–69 (2d Cir. 1983); United States v. Valentine, 706 F.2d 282, 292–94 (10th Cir. 1983); United States v. Frankenberry, 696 F.2d 239, 244–45 (3d Cir. 1982); United States v. Oliver, 683 F.2d 224, 232–33 (7th Cir. 1982).

²¹ United States v. Hutching, 75 F.3d 1453, 1460 (10th Cir. 1996) (sustaining three counts of conviction where one firearm was stored in the defendant’s bedroom, one in a car parked in the garage, and one in another vehicle); *see also* United States v. Goodine, 400 F.3d 202, 209 (4th Cir. 2005); United States v. Buchmeier, 255 F.3d 415, 423 (7th Cir. 2001); United States v. Adams, 214 F.3d 724, 728 (6th Cir. 2000).

²² United States v. Woolsey, 759 F.3d 905, 908 (8th Cir. 2014); *see also* United States v. Washington, 666 F. App’x 544, 546 (7th Cir. 2016) (affirming convictions for two section 922(g)(1) convictions where defendant maintained ammunition and weapons separately in home and in car, and citing cases for same).

firearms offenses], however, is not to say that he may be convicted and punished for two offenses.”²³ Rather, the district court at sentencing may merge the counts of conviction that are duplicative.²⁴

3. 18 U.S.C. § 922(q)(2)(A) - Possession or Discharge of a Firearm in a School Zone

Section 922(q)(2)(A) prohibits the possession a firearm that has moved in interstate or foreign commerce in a place that a person knows, or has reasonable cause to believe, is a school zone. Section 922(q)(3)(A) prohibits the discharge or attempted discharge of a firearm that has moved in interstate or foreign commerce in a place that a person knows is a school zone. A violation of either section 922(q)(2)(A) or section 922(q)(3)(A) is punishable by a statutory maximum term of imprisonment of five years.²⁵ However, the term of imprisonment for either offense must be imposed consecutively to any other term of imprisonment imposed.²⁶ For example, when a defendant is convicted of section 922(q)(2)(A) as well as another similar conviction arising out of the same act or transaction, the court should first calculate the overall guideline range, apportion the sentence between the count for section 922(q) and the other conviction, and then run the section 922(q) term of imprisonment consecutively.²⁷

The guideline applicable to §§ 922(q)(2)(A) or 922(q)(2)(A) offenses is §2K2.5 (Possession of Firearm or Dangerous Weapon in Federal Facility; Possession or Discharge of Firearm in School Zone).²⁸

4. 18 U.S.C. § 924(c) - Using or Carrying a Firearm During a Crime of Violence or Drug Trafficking Offense

18 U.S.C. § 924(c) provides for a fixed mandatory prison term for anyone who uses or carries a firearm during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, or who possesses a firearm in furtherance of such an offense (in addition to the

²³ 470 U.S. 856, 861 (1985).

²⁴ See, e.g., *United States v. Throneburg*, 921 F.2d 654, 657 (6th Cir. 1990) (affirming district court’s decision to permit the jury to consider multiple counts, anticipating that if multiplicitous convictions were obtained, it could dismiss counts as necessary).

²⁵ See § 924(a)(4).

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *United States v. Figueroa-Ocasio*, 805 F.3d 360, 373 (1st Cir. 2015).

²⁸ See USSG Appendix A (Statutory Index).

punishment provided for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime itself, if charged). For violations of section 924(c), the mandatory minimum penalty for the basic offense is 5 years; if the firearm is brandished, 7 years; if the firearm is discharged, 10 years; if the firearm is a short-barreled rifle or shotgun or semiautomatic assault weapon, 10 years; if a machine gun, destructive device, or firearm equipped with a silencer, 30 years. For second or subsequent convictions under section 924(c), the penalty is 25 years, and if the firearm is a machine gun, etc., life imprisonment without release. These penalties are consecutive to any other sentence, such as for the underlying offense.²⁹ The firearms involved are subject to seizure.³⁰ There is no defined maximum penalty, although most circuit courts conclude that the implied maximum penalty is life.³¹

In *United States v. O'Brien*, the Supreme Court held that the nature of the firearm (specifically, if the firearm is a “machinegun”) is an element of the offense at section 924(c) to be found by the jury, not a sentencing factor to be found by the judge.³² The decision resolved a circuit split. Before *O'Brien*, six circuits construed section 924(c) as creating a sentencing issue for the judge.³³ Two construed the statute as creating an element for the jury.³⁴ The Court had previously held in *Castillo v. United States* that the machinegun provision in an earlier version of section 924(c) constituted an element of the offense.³⁵ *O'Brien* arose as the result of a 1998 amendment to section 924(c) that essentially broke a single run-on sentence into subparagraphs. As it did in *Castillo*, the Court in *O'Brien* examined five factors directed at determining congressional intent for the amendment: (1) language and structure in section 924(c), (2) tradition regarding offense elements and sentencing factors, (3) risk of unfairness, (4) severity of the sentence, and (5) legislative history.³⁶ The court determined that section 924(c)’s new structure reflected current

²⁹ See 18 U.S.C. § 924(c).

³⁰ See 18 U.S.C. § 924(d)(1).

³¹ See, e.g., *United States v. Farmer*, 583 F.3d 131, 151 (2d Cir. 2009); *United States v. Gamboa*, 439 F.3d 796, 811 (8th Cir. 2006); *United States v. Dare*, 425 F.3d 634, 642 (9th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Cristobal*, 293 F.3d 134, 147 (4th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Avery*, 295 F.3d 1158, 1170 (10th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Sandoval*, 241 F.3d 549, 551 (7th Cir. 2001); *United States v. Pounds*, 230 F.3d 1317, 1319 (11th Cir. 2000).

³² 560 U.S. 218 (2010).

³³ See *United States v. Cassell*, 530 F.3d 1009, 1016–17 (D.C. Cir. 2008); *United States v. Ciszkowski*, 492 F.3d 1264, 1268 (11th Cir. 2007); *United States v. Gamboa*, 439 F.3d 796, 811 (8th Cir. 2006); *United States v. Avery*, 295 F.3d 1158, 1169–71 (10th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Harrison*, 272 F.3d 220, 225–26 (4th Cir. 2001); *United States v. Sandoval*, 241 F.3d 549, 550 (7th Cir. 2001).

³⁴ *United States v. O'Brien*, 542 F.3d 921, 926 (1st Cir. 2008); *United States v. Harris*, 397 F.3d 404 (6th Cir. 2005).

³⁵ 530 U.S. 120 (2000).

³⁶ *O'Brien*, 560 U.S. at 225–26.

practice to make statutes easier to read and that, in light of congressional silence as to the other factors, it was not intended to convert the offense element into a sentencing factor.³⁷

The guideline applicable to this statutory provision is §2K2.4 (Use of Firearm, Armor-Piercing Ammunition, or Explosive During or in Relation to Certain Crimes).³⁸

Issue—“During and in relation to” versus “in furtherance of” the particular offenses:

The statute sets out two different relationships between the firearm in question and the underlying crime of violence or drug trafficking offense, depending on whether the defendant (i) used or carried the firearm or (ii) possessed the firearm. If the defendant *used or carried* the firearm, these acts must only have been done “during and in relation to” the underlying offense for a violation of the statute to have occurred; if the defendant merely *possessed* the firearm, the possession must have been “in furtherance of” the underlying offense.

A significant body of case law has developed to interpret these two phrases, with the general consensus being that “in furtherance of” requires a closer relationship between the firearm and the underlying offense than “during and in relation to” requires. For example, where the defendant only possessed the firearm and the underlying offense is a drug trafficking offense, the Sixth Circuit held that “[i]n order for the possession to be in furtherance of a drug crime, the firearm must be strategically located so that it is quickly and easily available for use” and that other relevant factors “include whether the gun was loaded, the type of weapon, the legality of its possession, the type of drug activity conducted, and the time and circumstances under which the firearm was found.”³⁹ However, the Ninth Circuit has rejected the use of this list of factors “in closer, and more common, cases” and generally the “checklist” approach.⁴⁰ Rather, the Ninth Circuit held “that sufficient evidence supports a conviction under § 924(c) when facts in evidence reveal a nexus between the guns discovered and the underlying offense.”⁴¹ In contrast, the

³⁷ *Id.* at 234–35.

³⁸ See USSG Appendix A (Statutory Index).

³⁹ *United States v. Mackey*, 265 F.3d 457, 462 (6th Cir. 2001) (citing *United States v. Ceballos-Torres*, 218 F.3d 409, 414–15 (5th Cir. 2000)) (affirming conviction where “there was an illegally possessed, loaded, short-barreled shotgun in the living room of the crack house, easily accessible to the defendant and located near the scales and razor blades” and the defendant was found near the weapon in possession of cocaine and a large amount of cash); *cf.* *United States v. King*, 632 F.3d 646, 657–58 (10th Cir. 2011) (noting that the Tenth Circuit has not adopted *Mackey*’s “accessibility requirements,” and instead applies “a more flexible approach” in which accessibility is but one factor).

⁴⁰ *United States v. Krouse*, 370 F.3d 965, 968 (9th Cir. 2004).

⁴¹ *Id.* (affirming conviction where “[n]o less than five high caliber firearms, plus ammunition, were strategically located within easy reach in a room containing a substantial quantity of drugs and drug

Ninth Circuit rejected the claim that possession was in furtherance of a drug trafficking offense where there was no evidence to indicate that the defendant conducted drug trafficking activities in the home where the weapon was found.⁴²

Every circuit to address the question has held or assumed without deciding that a defendant who receives firearms in exchange for drugs possesses those firearms “in furtherance of” a drug trafficking offense.⁴³

With respect to the “during and in relation to” requirement, courts have interpreted this phrase to include a temporal element (“during”) as well as a nexus between the firearm and the underlying offense (“in relation to”). The nexus will depend on the particular facts and circumstances of the offenses, but generally the evidence must support a finding that the weapon’s presence was not coincidental; that is, simply carrying the firearm during the course of the offense is not sufficient.⁴⁴ Rather, “the evidence must support a finding that the firearm furthered the purpose or effect of the crime”⁴⁵

Issue—Whether a sentence imposed for a separate offense can supplant a section 924(c) sentence under the statute’s prefatory clause:

In *Abbott v. United States*, the Supreme Court resolved a circuit split concerning whether the “except” clause prefacing section 924(c) exempts an offender from prison time for a section 924(c) conviction when sentenced to a greater mandatory minimum term for a conviction under another statute.⁴⁶ Section 924(c) begins: “Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided by this subsection or by any other provision of law,” and proceeds to outline minimum sentences. Prior to *Abbott*, several circuits interpreted this language to refer to other minimum sentences that may be imposed for violations of section 924(c), not separate offenses.⁴⁷ Two circuits held that a defendant is not subject to a section 924(c) minimum sentence if he is subject to a higher

trafficking paraphernalia” and “other [uncharged] firearms, which Krouse apparently kept for purposes unrelated to his drug business, . . . were stored elsewhere throughout his home.”).

⁴² United States v. Rios, 449 F.3d 1009, 1015–16 (9th Cir. 2006).

⁴³ See United States v. Miranda, 666 F.3d 1280, 1283 (11th Cir. 2012) (collecting cases).

⁴⁴ United States v. Lampley, 127 F.3d 1231, 1241 (10th Cir. 1997).

⁴⁵ United States v. McRae, 156 F.3d 708, 712 (6th Cir. 1998).

⁴⁶ 562 U.S. 8 (2010).

⁴⁷ See United States v. Abbott, 574 F.3d 203 (3d Cir. 2009), *aff’d*, Abbott v. United States, 562 U.S. 8 (2010); United States v. London, 568 F.3d 553 (5th Cir. 2009) (adopting the reasoning of United States v. Collins, 205 F. App’x 196 (5th Cir. 2006)); United States v. Studifin, 240 F.3d 415, 423 (4th Cir. 2001); United States v. Jolivet, 257 F.3d 581, 587 (6th Cir. 2001); United States v. Alaniz, 235 F.3d 386, 389 (8th Cir. 2000).

minimum sentence, for example as an armed career criminal.⁴⁸ The Supreme Court granted certiorari in *Abbott and Gould* to resolve the issue. In *Abbott*, the Court held that the clause “by any other provision of law” refers to the conduct section 924(c) proscribes, *i.e.*, possessing a firearm in connection with a predicate crime. The Court rejected the petitioners’ alternative reading that the clause relieved a section 924(c) offender from additional punishment if another, higher mandatory minimum sentence was imposed. The Court concluded that such a reading nullifies the statute’s ascending series of minimums at section 924(c)(1)(A)–(C), a result contrary to congressional intent.⁴⁹

Several circuit courts have held that the district court cannot consider the severity of the mandatory minimum sentence imposed by section 924(c) when sentencing a defendant on a related crime.⁵⁰ To reduce the prison term imposed for the underlying count on the ground that the total sentence is too severe conflates the two punishments and thwarts the will of Congress.⁵¹

Issue—Whether section 924(c) authorizes multiple consecutive firearm possession counts arising out of the same drug trafficking offense:

Most circuits hold that section 924(c) authorizes a conviction if, during the course of an underlying predicate offense, a defendant uses or carries a firearm at any time; in other words, the “unit of prosecution” for section 924(c) is the underlying crime, rather than each individual “use” to which firearms are put throughout the duration of the underlying crime.⁵² Other Circuits have held that separate section 924(c) convictions may arise from one predicate offense.⁵³

⁴⁸ See *United States v. Whitley*, 529 F.3d 150 (2d Cir. 2008); *United States v. Almany*, 598 F.3d 238 (6th Cir.), *vacated*, 131 S. Ct. 637 (2010).

⁴⁹ See *Abbott*, 562 U.S. at 18–20.

⁵⁰ See *United States v. Williams*, 599 F.3d 831, 834 (8th Cir. 2010); *United States v. Chavez*, 549 F.3d 119, 135 (2d Cir. 2008); *United States v. Roberson*, 474 F.3d 432, 436 (7th Cir. 2007); see also *United States v. Ikegwuonu*, 826 F.3d 408, 411 (7th Cir. 2016) (reaffirming correctness of and collecting cases in agreement with *Roberson*).

⁵¹ See *Chavez*, 549 F.3d at 135. *But see* *United States v. Smith*, 756 F.3d 1179, 1190 (10th Cir. 2014) (disagreeing with *Chavez* and collecting cases that “expressly reject this line”).

⁵² See *United States v. Rentz*, 777 F.3d 1105, 1107 (10th Cir. 2015) (en banc); *United States v. Diaz*, 592 F.3d 467 (3d Cir. 2010); *United States v. Rodriguez*, 525 F.3d 85, 111–12 (1st Cir. 2008); *United States v. Baptiste*, 309 F.3d 274, 278–79 (5th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Anderson*, 59 F.3d 1323 (D.C. Cir. 1995); *United States v. Cappas*, 29 F.3d 1187, 1189–90 (7th Cir. 1994); *United States v. Taylor*, 13 F.3d 986, 992–93 (6th Cir. 1994); *United States v. Lindsay*, 985 F.2d 666, 676 (2d Cir. 1993); *United States v. Hamilton*, 953 F.2d 1344 (11th Cir. 1992); *United States v. Smith*, 924 F.2d 889, 894–95 (9th Cir. 1991).

⁵³ See *United States v. Phipps*, 319 F.3d 177, 186 (5th Cir. 2003); *United States v. Camps*, 32 F.3d 102, 108–09 (4th Cir. 1994); *United States v. Lucas*, 932 F.2d 1210, 1222–23 (8th Cir. 1991).

5. 22 U.S.C. § 2778 - Exporting Firearms without a Valid License

Section 2778 prohibits the exportation (and importation) of designated national defense-related articles (or services) without a valid license to do so.⁵⁴ Section 2778, a provision of the Arms Export Control Act, authorizes the President to control the import and export of defense articles and services, to designate those items that shall be considered defense articles and services, and promulgate regulations therefor. Items designated by the President as defense articles are added to the United States Munitions List (USML).⁵⁵ Firearms, including their component parts, and ammunition, along with a wide range of other defense-related equipment such as military electronics, aircraft and aircraft parts, and night vision equipment, are on the USML. A violation of section 2778 is punishable by a statutory maximum term of imprisonment of 20 years.

The guideline applicable to a section 2778 offense is §2M5.2 (Exportation of Arms, Munitions, or Military Equipment or Services Without Required Validated Export License).⁵⁶ Subsection (a)(2) at §2M5.2 provides for Base Offense Level 14 if the offense involved only (A) two or less non-fully automatic small arms (rifles, handguns, or shotguns), (B) 500 or less rounds of ammunition for non-fully automatic small arms, or (C) both.⁵⁷ Subsection (a)(1) provides for Base Offense Level 26 if subsection (a)(2) does not apply.

Firearms cases prosecuted under section 2778 involve the exportation, or attempted exportation, of firearms or ammunition across the U.S. border. Frequently the destination in such cases is Mexico, but the firearms may also be destined for other countries.⁵⁸ Violations of section 2778 that involve defense articles and services other than firearms are outside the scope of this primer.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Pub. L. No. 94-329, Tit. II (June 30, 1976).

⁵⁵ See 22 C.F.R. § 121.1.

⁵⁶ See USSG Appendix A (Statutory Index).

⁵⁷ In 2011, the Commission reduced the number of small arms at USSG §2M5.2(a)(2) from ten to two and added the “ammunition only” provision. See USSG App. C, amend. 753 (effect. Nov. 1, 2011).

⁵⁸ See, e.g., *United States v. Sero*, 520 F.3d 187 (2d Cir. 2008) (affirming defendant’s sentence for shipping firearms parts and ammunition to the Philippines); *United States v. Castro-Trevino*, 464 F.3d 536 (5th Cir. 2006) (affirming conviction under section 2778 and sentence under §2M5.2 for attempting to export firearm ammunition to Mexico); *United States v. Muthana*, 60 F.3d 1217 (7th Cir. 1995) (exporting ammunition to Yemen); *United States v. Galvan-Revuelta*, 958 F.2d 66 (5th Cir. 1992) (same).

⁵⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Boltutskiy*, 634 F. App’x. 887 (3rd Cir. 2015) (exporting night vision devices to Belarus); *United States v. Reyes*, 270 F.3d 1158 (7th Cir. 2001) (exporting aircraft components to Iran).

B. STATUTORY SENTENCING ENHANCEMENT

1. 18 U.S.C. § 924(e) - Armed Career Criminal Act of 1984 (ACCA)

This sentencing enhancement imposes a mandatory minimum 15-year sentence of imprisonment (and a life maximum) for section 922(g) violators who have three previous convictions for a violent felony or serious drug offense, committed on occasions different from one another. “Violent felony” means any crime punishable by imprisonment for more than one year, that

- (1) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against another;
- (2) or is burglary, arson, or extortion, involves the use of explosives, or involves other conduct that presents a serious potential risk of physical injury to another.⁶⁰

“Serious drug offense” is defined as either certain federal drug offenses with a statutory maximum of ten years or more imprisonment, or state offenses involving manufacturing, distributing, or possessing with intent to manufacture or distribute, with a statutory maximum of ten years or more imprisonment. The guideline implementing this statutory provision is §4B1.4 (Armed Career Criminal).⁶¹

Issue—What is a “violent felony”?

The definition of the term “violent felony” for purposes of the ACCA has been the subject of an ongoing series of Supreme Court cases, in addition to numerous cases in the lower federal courts. The volume of case law on this issue results primarily from the very general language of the statute and the variety of different state laws to which it must be applied. Although an exhaustive treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this primer, this section will describe the major Supreme Court cases on the issue and in so doing sketch the general contours of the question.

The first major Supreme Court case instructing courts how to determine whether a particular prior offense is a “violent felony” was *Taylor v. United States*.⁶² The Court in that

⁶⁰ As explained in greater detail below, the Supreme Court invalidated the underlined text – known as the “residual clause” – in *Johnson v. United States*, 135 S. Ct. 2551 (2015). Accordingly, a prior conviction may no longer be counted as an ACCA predicate solely because it meets the residual clause’s definition.

⁶¹ See USSG Appendix A (Statutory Index).

⁶² 495 U.S. 575 (1990).

case addressed the question of how to determine whether a particular state conviction for an offense called burglary qualifies as a “burglary” for purposes of the ACCA. The Court concluded that, rather than relying on what each individual state law determined was a “burglary,” Congress intended a “generic, contemporary meaning of burglary” so that, regardless of what the particular offense was *labeled*, if it had as elements of the offense the same elements of generic, contemporary burglary, it would be considered a “burglary” for ACCA purposes.⁶³ In making this comparison, the Court explained that courts should apply a “formal categorical approach” by which courts would look not to the facts of the particular defendant’s offense, but instead look to the elements of the statute under which the defendant was convicted.⁶⁴ However, the Court described an exception to this general rule: if the state statute is broader than the generic offense, courts could look to other records of the case to see if the jury determined that the defendant had actually committed the generic offense.⁶⁵ The Court addressed this modification of the categorical approach in *Shepard v. United States*.⁶⁶ In that case, the Court held that sentencing courts must look only to “the terms of the charging document, the terms of a plea agreement or transcript of colloquy between judge and defendant in which the factual basis for the plea was confirmed by the defendant, or to some comparable judicial record of this information.”⁶⁷ In *Descamps v. United States*,⁶⁸ the Court held that this modified categorical approach may not be applied where the statute of conviction is indivisible—that is, one not containing alternative elements. In *Mathis v. United States*,⁶⁹ the Court further clarified that this means that even a statute which is indivisible but lists “alternative means” of commission is not subject to the modified categorical approach.

The Court interpreted the phrase “physical force” as used in the ACCA’s “violent felony” definition in *Johnson v. United States*.⁷⁰ The Court held that in the context of “violent felony,” “physical force” means violent force, “capable of causing physical pain or injury to another [].”⁷¹ Therefore, the Florida felony offense of battery by “[a]ctually and intentionally touch[ing] another person” does not have as an element the use of physical force and does not constitute a “violent felony” under the ACCA.

⁶³ *Id.* at 598–99.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 600–01.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 602.

⁶⁶ 544 U.S. 13 (2005).

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 26.

⁶⁸ 133 S. Ct. 2276 (2013).

⁶⁹ 579 U.S. ---, 136 S. Ct. 2243 (2016).

⁷⁰ 559 U.S. 133 (2014).

⁷¹ *Id.* at 140.

Other Supreme Court cases focused on the application of these principles to a different part of the ACCA’s “violent felony” definition: the so-called “residual clause.” The “residual clause” is the part of the definition that appears at 18 U.S.C. § 924(e)(2)(B)(ii) following the listed offenses such as burglary; it provides that, in addition to the listed offenses, an offense that “otherwise involves conduct that presents a serious potential risk of physical injury to another” is a “violent felony.” This provision has now been invalidated by the Supreme Court in *Johnson v. United States*.⁷² In that decision, the Court held that the ACCA’s “residual clause” is unconstitutionally vague and therefore that imposing an increased sentence under that provision violates the Due Process Clause. In light of *Johnson*, the ACCA residual clause may no longer be used to classify offenses as violent felonies.

Residual clauses also appear elsewhere in statute and the sentencing guidelines, for example, in the definition of “crime of violence” at 18 U.S.C. § 16, and in the definition of “crime of violence” in the career offender guideline. Much of the case law on how to determine what constitutes a “violent felony” under the ACCA also applies to determining what constitutes a “crime of violence” under §4B1.2 of the Guidelines, and vice versa. The definition of the term “crime of violence” in §4B1.2 is very similar to the definition of the term “violent felony” in the ACCA, so courts have treated cases defining those terms accordingly.⁷³ In *Beckles v. United States*, the Supreme Court resolved a circuit split, holding that the sentencing guidelines, including the residual clause at §4B1.2, are not subject to vagueness challenges.⁷⁴ Prior to *Beckles*, only the Eleventh Circuit has explicitly held that the holding in *Johnson* did not affect the residual clause in §4B1.2.⁷⁵ The Third, Sixth, and Tenth Circuits had explicitly held that the holding in *Johnson* rendered the residual clause in §4B1.2 void for vagueness.⁷⁶ The First, Second, Fourth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Circuits either accepted the government’s concessions, or assumed without deciding, that *Johnson* applies and remanded cases for resentencing.⁷⁷

⁷² 135 S. Ct. 2551 (2015).

⁷³ See, e.g., *United States v. Serna*, 309 F.3d 859, 864 (5th Cir. 2002).

⁷⁴ No. 15-8544, --- U.S. ---, 137 S. Ct. 886 (Mar. 6, 2017).

⁷⁵ *United States v. Matchett*, 802 F.3d 1185 (11th Cir. 2015) (holding that holding in *Johnson* did not make the residual clause of section §4B1.2(a) also unconstitutionally vague).

⁷⁶ See *United States v. Pawlak*, 822 F.3d 902 (6th Cir. 2016) (“Our reading of the current state of the law as established by the Supreme Court compels our holding that the rationale of *Johnson* applies equally to the residual clause of the Guidelines.”); *United States v. Madrid*, 805 F.3d 1204, 1210 (10th Cir. 2015) (“In light of the Supreme Court’s decision in [*Johnson*], we hold that the residual clause [in §4B1.2] is unconstitutionally vague”); *United States v. Townsend*, 638 F. App’x 172 (3rd Cir. 2015) (holding that *Johnson* applies to identical language in the Guidelines’ career offender enhancement).

⁷⁷ See *United States v. Hudson* 823 F.3d 11 (1st Cir. 2016) (accepting the government’s concession that *Johnson*’s holding “invalidates the district court’s application of United States Sentencing Guidelines §4B1.4(b)”); *United States v. Maldonado*, 636 Fed. App’x 807, 810 (2nd Cir. 2016) (“We therefore proceed on

III. FIREARMS GUIDELINE: §2K2.1

A. GENERALLY

The offense level under this guideline is determined principally by the type of firearm in question, the defendant's prior convictions for violent felonies or drug-related felonies, and the defendant's status as a person prohibited by law from possessing firearms (for example, a convicted felon or an illegal alien), in addition to other offense and offender characteristics, as discussed below. The base offense level ranges from **6** to **26**, depending on which of these characteristics are present.

B. DEFINITIONS

The guideline defines "firearm" as it is defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(3): "The term 'firearm' means (A) any weapon (including a starter gun) which will or is designed to or may readily be converted to expel a projectile by the action of an explosive; (B) the frame or receiver of any such weapon; (C) any firearm muffler or firearm silencer; or (D) any destructive device", *but* does not include an "antique firearm."⁷⁸ Generally, the circuit courts are in agreement that section 921(a)(3) requires the government only to prove that the firearm in question was designed to fire a projectile, not that the firearm was operable at the time the offense occurred.⁷⁹

the assumption that the Supreme Court's reasoning with respect to the ACCA's residual clause applies to the identically worded Guideline §4B1.2(a)(2)'s residual clause."); *United States v. Frazier*, 621 F. App'x 166, 168 (4th Cir. 2015) (assuming without deciding that *Johnson* applies to the guidelines); *Ramirez v. United States*, 799 F.3d 845, 856 (7th Cir. 2015) ("[W]e proceed on the assumption that the Supreme Court's reasoning applies to section 4B1.2 as well"); *United States v. Taylor*, 803 F.3d 931 (8th Cir. 2015) (remanding for resentencing without deciding whether the guideline is unconstitutionally vague); *United States v. Willis*, 795 F.3d 986 (9th Cir. 2015) ("It is an open question, however, whether this residual clause [in §4B1.2(a)] remains valid in the light of *Johnson*...").

⁷⁸ An "antique firearm" is defined at 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(16) to mean, generally, (A) any firearm manufactured before 1898, (B) a replica of a firearm manufactured before 1898, or (C) a muzzle loading firearm designed to use black powder.

⁷⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Davis*, 668 F.3d 576 (8th Cir. 2012); *United States v. Gwyn*, 481 F.3d 849 (D.C. Cir. 2007) (faulty firing pin); *United States v. Rivera*, 415 F.3d 284 (2d Cir. 2005) (firing pin broken; firing pin channel blocked); *United States v. Brown*, 117 F.3d 353 (7th Cir. 1997) (firing pin removed by undercover law enforcement agent); *United States v. Hunter*, 101 F.3d 82 (9th Cir. 1996) (firing pin bent); *United States v. Yannott*, 42 F.3d 999 (6th Cir. 1994) (firing pin broken); *United States v. Ruiz*, 986 F.2d 905 (5th Cir. 1993) (damaged hammer); *United States v. Martinez*, 912 F.2d 419 (10th Cir. 1990) (unloaded firearm); *United States v. York*, 830 F.2d 885 (8th Cir. 1987) (missing firing pin).

The alternative offense levels at §2K2.1(a)(1)(A)(i), (a)(3)(A)(i), and (a)(4)(B)(i)(I) apply if the offense involved a “semiautomatic firearm that is capable of accepting a large capacity magazine.” As defined in Application Note 2, “a ‘semiautomatic firearm that is capable of accepting a large capacity magazine’ means a semiautomatic firearm that has the ability to fire many rounds without reloading because at the time of the offense (A) the firearm had attached to it a magazine or similar device that could accept more than 15 rounds of ammunition; or (B) a magazine or similar device that could accept more than 15 rounds of ammunition was in close proximity to the firearm”, but does *not* mean “a semiautomatic firearm with an attached tubular device capable of operating only with .22 caliber rim fire ammunition.” One circuit has found that application of the alternative offense level at §2K2.1(a)(3) is applicable to the possession of an inoperable semiautomatic assault weapon unless the weapon has been rendered permanently inoperable.⁸⁰

A provision of the National Firearms Act,⁸¹ 26 U.S.C. § 5845(a), separately defines “firearm” in a more limited fashion than 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(3). Its definition includes certain shotguns, rifles, machineguns, silencers, destructive devices, and “any weapon or device capable of being concealed on the person from which a shot can be discharged through the energy of an explosive, a pistol or revolver having a barrel with a smooth bore designed or redesigned to fire a fixed shotgun shell, weapons with combination shotgun and rifle barrels 12 inches or more, less than 18 inches in length, from which only a single discharge can be made from either barrel without manual reloading, and shall include any such weapon which may be readily restored to fire.”⁸² Section 5845’s definition excludes antique firearms⁸³ and those found to be “primarily . . . collector’s item[s].”

The Commission recently promulgated an amendment to clarify the definition of the term “crime of violence” in §4B1.2.⁸⁴ This amendment left untouched the “elements clause” of the definition, but modified the “enumerated clause” and removed the “residual clause” completely. Under the new definition, a crime of violence is a federal or state offense punishable by a term of imprisonment exceeding one year that has as an element the use, attempt, or threat of physical force against another person. The guideline now specifies several offenses that fit in this category, including murder, voluntary manslaughter, kidnapping, aggravated assault, a forcible sex offense, robbery, arson,

⁸⁰ See *United States v. Davis*, 668 F.3d 576 (8th Cir. 2012).

⁸¹ See Pub. L. No. 73-757, 48 Stat. 1236, as amended by the Gun Control Act of 1968, Pub. L. No. 90-618, 82 Stat. 1213, 1230.

⁸² See 26 U.S.C. § 5845(e).

⁸³ Like 18 U.S.C. § 921, 26 U.S.C. § 5845(g) defines “antique firearm” to mean, generally, any firearm manufactured before 1898 or a replica of such a firearm. Unlike § 921, a muzzle loading firearm designed to use black powder is not included under § 5845.

⁸⁴ App. C., amend 798 (effect. Aug. 1, 2016).

extortion, or the use or unlawful possession of a firearm described in 26 U.S.C. § 5845(a) or explosive material as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 841(c).

The commentary to the guideline similarly defines the term “controlled substance offense” with reference to §4B1.2, which in turn defines the term as any felony violation of a law “that prohibits the manufacture, import, export, distribution, or dispensing of a controlled substance (or a counterfeit substance) or the possession of a controlled substance (or a counterfeit substance) with intent to manufacture, import, export, distribute, or dispense” the substance. As with “crime of violence,” some of the issues surrounding the definition of this term are discussed separately below; *see* Section VII.B, *infra*.

At 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g) and (n), referenced in Application Note 3 to §2K2.1, a defendant is a prohibited person, for purposes of this section, if he: has been convicted of a crime punishable by more than one year of imprisonment; “is a fugitive from justice;” “is an unlawful user of or addicted to any controlled substance;” “has been adjudicated as a mental defective or . . . has been committed to a mental institution;” is an illegal alien or a non-citizen in the country pursuant to certain types of visas; has been dishonorably discharged from the Armed Forces; has renounced his citizenship; is subject to certain court orders relating to domestic violence; has been convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence; or is under indictment for a crime punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year.

C. SPECIFIC OFFENSE CHARACTERISTICS

The specific offense characteristics represent various changes to the base offense level described above. A number of common application issues arise when determining whether a particular specific offense characteristic applies.

1. Multiple Firearms

If a defendant possesses three or more firearms, §2K2.1(b)(1) specifies an increase in the base offense level of two, four, six, eight or ten levels, depending on the number of firearms.

In determining the number of firearms possessed for purposes of this specific offense characteristic, it is important to note that §2K2.1 is listed at §3D1.2(d) and therefore is subject to the provisions of §1B1.3(a)(2). As a result, if a court finds by a preponderance of the evidence that the defendant possessed firearms other than those charged in the indictment that were illegally possessed as a part of the same course of

conduct as, or as part of a common scheme or plan with the charged firearm(s), the additional firearms will also be considered in applying §2K2.1(b)(1).

Application Note 5 to this guideline also emphasizes that any firearms *lawfully* possessed by the defendant are *not* counted. Whether a particular firearm is lawfully possessed is a question of federal law; if a firearm is illegally possessed under state law but legal under federal law, it is not counted.⁸⁵ Traditional doctrines of constructive possession may apply.⁸⁶

2. *Sporting Purposes or Collection*

For certain defendants, a reduction in the offense level is specified where the court finds that the defendant “possessed all ammunition and firearms solely for lawful sporting purposes or collection, and did not unlawfully discharge or otherwise unlawfully use such firearms or ammunition.”⁸⁷ If the court finds that this provision applies, the offense level is reduced to six. The reduction does not apply, however, to base offense levels determined under subsections (a)(1) –(a)(5) (offense levels 26 – 18) of §2K2.1. The defendant bears the burden of proving the applicability of this reduction.⁸⁸ However, the guidelines do not state a requirement that a defendant produce evidence of actual *use* of the firearms in question, only that the firearms were *possessed* for sporting or collection purposes.⁸⁹ A district court’s finding is reviewed for clear error on appeal.⁹⁰ Applicability of the reduction is determined by examining the “surrounding circumstances” including “the number and type of firearms, the amount and type of ammunition, the location and circumstances of possession and actual use, the nature of the defendant’s criminal history (*e.g.*, prior convictions for offenses involving firearms), and the extent to which possession was restricted by local law.”⁹¹ Selling weapons will not disqualify a defendant from this reduction, “unless the sales are so extensive that the defendant becomes a dealer (a person who trades for profit) rather than a collector (a person who trades for betterment of his

⁸⁵ United States v. Ahmad, 202 F.3d 588 (2d Cir. 2000).

⁸⁶ See, *e.g.*, United States v. Eastham, 618 F. App’x. 421, 423 (10th Cir. 2015) (“To establish possession, the government can show either actual or constructive possession of the firearms.”).

⁸⁷ USSG §2K2.1(b)(2).

⁸⁸ United States v. Keller, 947 F.2d 739 (5th Cir. 1991).

⁸⁹ United States v. Mason, 692 F.3d 178 (2d Cir. 2012).

⁹⁰ See United States v. Massey, 462 F.3d 843 (8th Cir. 2006).

⁹¹ USSG §2K2.1(b)(2), comment (n.6).

holdings).”⁹² “Plinking,” a form of target shooting for amusement and recreation, can be a sporting purpose under the guidelines.⁹³

If the defendant admits, or the evidence indicates, that he possessed the gun for personal protection, the reduction does not apply as the provision specifies that the firearm must be possessed *solely* for lawful sporting purposes or collection.⁹⁴

3. Stolen Firearms/Altered or Obliterated Serial Numbers

Section 2K2.1(b)(4) provides for an enhancement where a firearm is stolen or has an altered serial number. Prior to November 1, 2006, possession of either stolen firearms or firearms with altered or obliterated serial numbers subjected a defendant to a 2-level enhancement. After Amendment 691, stolen firearms still lead to a 2-level enhancement, but firearms with altered or obliterated serial numbers lead to a 4-level enhancement. Note that a defendant need not have *known* that a firearm he illegally possessed was stolen⁹⁵ or had an altered or obliterated serial number.⁹⁶ The enhancement applies even where

⁹² United States v. Miller, 547 F.3d 718, 721 (7th Cir. 2008) (citing United States v. Clingan, 254 F.3d 624 (6th Cir. 2001)).

⁹³ See United States v. Hanson, 534 F.3d 1315 (10th Cir. 2008) (citing United States v. Lewitzke, 176 F.3d 1022 (7th Cir. 1999); United States v. Bossinger, 12 F.3d 28 (3d Cir. 1993)).

⁹⁴ United States v. Ramirez-Rios, 270 F.3d 1185 (8th Cir. 2001); United States v. Wyckoff, 918 F.2d 925 (11th Cir. 1990).

⁹⁵ See U.S. v. Taylor, 659 F.3d 339, 343–44 (4th Cir. 2011) (holding that the lack of a scienter requirement in the stolen firearm enhancement is permissible); United States v. Martinez, 339 F.3d 759, 761–62 (8th Cir. 2003) (joining other circuits holding the enhancement’s lack of a scienter requirement does not raise due process concerns); United States v. Murphy, 96 F.3d 846, 848–49 (6th Cir. 1996) (holding the enhancement does not violate due process despite the absence of a scienter requirement); United States v. Griffiths, 41 F.3d 844 (2d Cir. 1994) (same); United States v. Mobley, 956 F.2d 450 (3d Cir. 1992) (same); United States v. Goodell, 990 F.2d 497, 499–501 (9th Cir. 1993) (same); United States v. Richardson, 8 F.3d 769 (11th Cir. 1993) (same); United States v. Schnell, 982 F.2d 216, 219–22 (7th Cir. 1992) (recounting that the Sentencing Commission intends the enhancement to apply regardless of defendant’s knowledge that the firearm is stolen); United States v. Taylor, 937 F.2d 676, 682 (D.C. Cir. 1991) (same); United States v. Singleton, 946 F.2d 23, 26–27 (5th Cir. 1991) (lack of scienter permissible);

⁹⁶ See United States v. Perez, 585 F.3d 880, 883 (5th Cir. 2009) (holding that the enhancement does not require defendant to know the serial number is altered or obliterated); United States v. Webb, 403 F.3d 373 (6th Cir. 2005) (same); United States v. Abernathy, 83 F.3d 17, 19 (1st Cir. 1996) (“[T]his enhancement explicitly applies ‘whether or not the defendant knew or had reason to believe that the firearm . . . had an altered or obliterated serial number.’”); United States v. Williams, 49 F.3d 92 (2d Cir. 1995) (“Nor is due process offended by strict liability construction of [the enhancement]....”); United States v. Schnell, 982 F.2d 216, 219–22 (7th Cir. 1992) (stating absence of the enhancement’s scienter requirement does not violate substantive due process); United States v. Shabazz, 221 F. App’x 529 (9th Cir. 2007) (“[T]he enhancement applies without regard to a defendant’s mental state.”); United States v. McMahon, 153 F.3d 729 (10th Cir. 1998) (same); United States v. Starr, 361 F. App’x 60 (11th Cir. 2010) (same); see also United States v. Leake,

partially obliterated serial numbers can be discerned through use of microscopy or other techniques.⁹⁷ The First, Eighth, and Eleventh Circuits have held that if a firearm has more than one serial number on it, only one of the serial numbers needs to be altered to trigger the enhancement.⁹⁸

If the defendant steals the firearm in a burglary, the enhancement applies.⁹⁹ The Ninth Circuit has held that “the phrase ‘altered or obliterated’ cannot support the contention that a firearm’s serial number must be rendered scientifically untraceable for” the provision to apply.¹⁰⁰ Rather, the court said, the provision applies when the serial number “is materially changed in a way that makes accurate information less accessible.”¹⁰¹

To avoid double counting, Application Note 8 states that the enhancement should not apply if the only offense to which §2K2.1 applies is one of several specified offenses themselves involving stolen firearms or firearms with altered or obliterated serial numbers and the base offense level is determined under subsection (a)(7).¹⁰²

4. Trafficking

The guideline provides a 4-level enhancement if the defendant trafficked in firearms. Application Note 13(A) defines “trafficking” for purposes of this enhancement, requiring two elements: the defendant must have “transported, transferred, or otherwise disposed of two or more firearms to another individual, or received [such] firearms with the intent to [do so]” and the defendant must have known or had reason to believe these acts would cause the firearms to be transferred to an individual who either (i) could not legally possess them or (ii) who intended to use or dispose of them unlawfully.¹⁰³ The

396 F. App’x 898, 905 (3d Cir. 2010) (stating that *Kimbrough* does not force a district court to analyze the empirical grounding of the enhancement’s lack of a *mens rea* requirement).

⁹⁷ See, e.g., *United States v. Jones*, 643 F.3d 257 (8th Cir. 2011).

⁹⁸ *United States v. Serrano-Mercado*, 784 F.3d 838, 850 (1st Cir. 2015); *United States v. Thigpen*, 848 F.3d 841, 845–46 (8th Cir. 2017); *United States v. Warren*, 820 F.3d 406, 408 (11th Cir. 2016).

⁹⁹ *United States v. Goff*, 314 F.3d 1248, 1249 (10th Cir. 2003) (collecting cases); *United States v. Hurst*, 228 F.3d 751 (6th Cir. 2000).

¹⁰⁰ *United States v. Carter*, 421 F.3d 909, 916 (9th Cir. 2005).

¹⁰¹ *Id.*; see also *United States v. Perez*, 585 F.3d 880 (5th Cir. 2009) (holding that the district court did not err in finding that the serial number of a firearm was materially changed even though damage to the number did not render it unreadable).

¹⁰² See, e.g., *United States v. Dudley*, 509 F. App’x 739 (10th Cir. 2013).

¹⁰³ See, e.g., *United States v. Garcia*, 635 F.3d 472 (10th Cir. 2011); *United States v. Juarez*, 626 F.3d 246, 252–53 (5th Cir. 2010) (finding the clandestine nature of the firearms transactions and \$200 premium per

Sixth Circuit recently interpreted the requirement at (b)(5) that two or more firearms be transferred to “another individual” to mean that at least two firearms must be transferred to the same individual, and not to multiple individuals in the aggregate.¹⁰⁴

Where a defendant transfers firearms to an undercover agent posing as a prohibited person, the enhancement will apply.¹⁰⁵

Application Note 13(C) states that where “the defendant trafficked substantially more than 25 firearms, an upward departure may be warranted.”¹⁰⁶

Application Note 13(D) explains that if the defendant both possessed and trafficked three or more firearms, *both* the specific offense characteristics for number of firearms and trafficking would apply. The Second, Fifth, and Seventh Circuits have held that it is impermissible double counting to apply a §2K2.1(b)(5) “trafficking enhancement” in combination with a §2K2.1(b)(6) “another felony offense” enhancement when they are based on the same trafficking offense.¹⁰⁷

5. Firearms Leaving the United States

Section 2K2.1(b)(6)(A) provides for an enhancement where the defendant “possessed any firearm or ammunition while leaving or attempting to leave the United States” or possessed or transferred the same with knowledge, intent or reason to believe it would be transported outside the United States. Prior to 2011, when the Commission added subsection (b)(6)(A), some courts applied what is now §2K2.1(b)(6)(B) to cases in

firearm sufficient to cause reason to believe the weapons were intended for unlawful use (export to Mexican drug cartels) and justified the enhancement).

¹⁰⁴ *United States v. Henry*, 819 F.3d 856 (6th Cir. 2016) (improper to apply enhancement where defendant sold one firearm to confidential informant and one firearm to undercover agent; “‘Another’ indicates that the noun that follows is singular.”).

¹⁰⁵ *See, e.g., id.* at 870 (“[T]he agent need not have actually been a felon for §2K2.1(b)(5) to apply.”); *United States v. Fields*, 608 F. App’x 806, 813 (11th Cir. 2015) (“Because nothing in the Guidelines commentary suggests that defendant’s belief must be true, Fields’ focus on the fact he transferred firearms solely to an undercover officer is unpersuasive.”); *United States v. Sacus*, 784 F.3d 1214, 1218 (8th Cir. 2015) (affirming enhancement where defendant sold firearms to undercover agent who claimed to have felony convictions).

¹⁰⁶ *See, e.g., United States v. Hernandez*, 633 F.3d 370 (5th Cir. 2011) (affirming an upward departure pursuant to §5K2.0 for trafficking 103 firearms to Mexican drug cartels).

¹⁰⁷ *United States v. Young*, 811 F.3d 592 (2nd Cir. 2016); *United States v. Guzman*, 623 F. App’x 151 (5th Cir. 2015); *United States v. Johns*, 732 F.3d 736 (7th Cir. 2013); *see also United States v. Velasquez*, 825 F.3d 257, 259 (5th Cir. 2016) (“Although our opinion in *Guzman* is unpublished, it is nonetheless persuasive.”).

which the defendant transported or attempted to transport firearms across an international border of the United States. Those courts concluded that because transporting a firearm outside the United States is generally a felony under federal law, such conduct may qualify as “another felony offense” for purposes of subsection (b)(6).¹⁰⁸

For clarity, and to promote consistency of application, in 2011 the Commission amended §2K2.1 to add a new prong (A) in subsection (b)(6) that applies “if the defendant possessed any firearm or ammunition while leaving or attempting to leave the United States, or possessed or transferred any firearm or ammunition with knowledge, intent, or reason to believe that it would be transferred out of the United States,” and redesignated the existing provision as prong (B).¹⁰⁹ Under the amendment, a defendant receives a 4-level enhancement and minimum offense level 18 if either prong applies.

6. Firearm or Ammunition Possessed “in connection with” Another Offense

Section 2K2.1(b)(6)(B) provides an enhancement if the defendant “used or possessed any firearm or ammunition *in connection with* another felony offense”¹¹⁰ Application Note 14 to §2K2.1 provides that a firearm or ammunition is possessed “in connection with” an offense if it “facilitated, or had the potential of facilitating” the offense. The enhancement applies equally to firearms and ammunition only cases.¹¹¹

Application Note 14 further discusses the “in connection with” requirement when the other offense is burglary, providing that the firearm *is* possessed in connection with a burglary when the defendant finds and takes the firearm in the course of committing the burglary. The defendant need not have used the firearm in any other way in the course of the burglary.

¹⁰⁸ See, e.g., *United States v. Juarez*, 626 F.3d 246 (5th Cir. 2010) (holding that, under the guideline as amended by the Commission in 2008, the district court did not plainly err in applying §2K2.1(b)(6) to a defendant who transferred firearms with reason to believe they would be taken across the border in a manner that would violate 22 U.S.C. § 2778(b) and (c), which prohibits, among other things, the unlicensed export of defense articles and punishes such violations by up to 20 years’ imprisonment); see also discussion *supra* regarding 22 U.S.C. § 2778 and §2M5.2.

¹⁰⁹ See USSG App. C, amend. 753 (Nov. 1, 2011).

¹¹⁰ A 2011 amendment redesignated the “in connection with” enhancement at §2K2.1(b)(6) as §2K2.1(b)(6)(B). See USSG App. C, amend. 753 (Nov. 1, 2011).

¹¹¹ Prior to 2006, there was a split among the circuits regarding the interpretation of the “in connection with” requirement of §2K2.1(b)(6)(B). Most circuits applied the rule announced by the Supreme Court in *Smith v. United States*, in which the Court interpreted the phrase “in relation to” as it is used in 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1); “the firearm must have some purpose or effect with respect to the . . . crime; its presence or involvement cannot be the result of accident or coincidence.” Other circuits declined to adopt this standard. The Commission resolved the circuit conflict in 2006, adopting the majority position in Amendment 691.

When the other offense is a drug trafficking offense, the application note explains that if “a firearm is found in close proximity to drugs, drug-manufacturing materials, or drug paraphernalia,” it is possessed “in connection with” the drug trafficking offense. Some courts have interpreted the guideline to mean that, in drug trafficking cases, “[t]he enhancement must be imposed unless it is clearly improbable that [the defendant] possessed the firearm in connection with another felony offense.”¹¹² In such cases, then, the defendant must demonstrate that it is “clearly improbable” that the required relationship exists in order to avoid the enhancement. (The same rule applies to the enhancement at §2D1.1(b)(1), which provides a 2-level enhancement in drug trafficking cases “[i]f a dangerous weapon (including a firearm) was possessed.”). Courts have varied in whether they find proximity alone to be sufficient in these cases and the degree of fact-finding required to find a nexus between the drugs and guns.¹¹³ Typically, where the defendant has exchanged drugs for guns, the enhancement will apply.¹¹⁴

The Eighth Circuit, however, emphasized one limitation on this rule: in a case in which the defendant was not alleged to have been a drug trafficker or to have carried the drugs and firearm outside his home, and the “other offense” in question was possession of trace amounts of methamphetamine (residue in a baggie), the court reversed the district court’s application of the enhancement, concluding that “the mere presence of drug residue . . . and firearms alone is [in]sufficient to prove the ‘in connection with’ requirement . . . when the ‘felony offense’ is drug possession.”¹¹⁵ However, where a

¹¹² United States v. Agee, 333 F.3d 864, 866 (8th Cir. 2003).

¹¹³ Compare United States v. Clinton, 825 F.3d 809, 813–15 (7th Cir. 2016) (reversing enhancement because “there was little evidence regarding [defendant’s] drug trafficking activities that would support a determination that the firearm” facilitated any offense: firearm kept in closet in bedroom without any evidence of drugs was not in close enough proximity to drug evidence in living room under couch and error to find drugs were exchanged for a weapon where factual finding was merely that purchaser was a drug addict) with United States v. Johnson, 645 F. App’x 427, 428 (11th Cir. 2016) (“Mere possession of a firearm can be enough to apply a sentencing enhancement because drugs and guns generally go together, and the firearm was not required to serve a purpose related to the crime.”).

¹¹⁴ See, e.g., United States v. Schmitt, 770 F.3d 524, 538–40 (7th Cir. 2014) (enhancement properly applied where preponderance of the evidence supported a finding that he purchased the firearm in exchange for cash and drugs and sold drugs in order to obtain the firearm); Clinton, 825 F.3d at 813 (“We have held that the §2K2.1(b)(6)(B) enhancement is proper when the defendant has engaged in an exchange of drugs for a weapon.”). But see United States v. Gates, 845 F.3d 310 (7th Cir. 2017) (error to apply enhancement where defendant accepted gun as collateral for drugs and then sold gun to confidential informant for money and also gave informant drugs; in neither case was the gun used to facilitate a drug crime).

¹¹⁵ United States v. Smith, 535 F.3d 883, 886 (8th Cir. 2008); cf. United States v. Butler, 594 F.3d 955, 966 (8th Cir. 2010) (distinguishing Smith when the defendant possessed more than a “‘user’ amount of drugs”); see also United States v. Jeffries, 587 F.3d 690, 694 (5th Cir. 2009) (drug-possession felonies trigger enhancement only if the court makes an affirmative finding that the firearm facilitated or had the potential to facilitate the drug possession); United States v. Johnson, 846 F.3d 1249, 1250–51 (8th Cir. 2017) (same); cf.

defendant has “user” amounts of drugs, more than mere residue, and there are other factors that indicate that the firearm could facilitate another felony, the enhancement may apply.¹¹⁶

In 2014, the Commission resolved another circuit split affecting both the (b)(6)(B) SOC and the (c)(1) cross reference. Circuits had disagreed over whether certain relevant conduct principles in §1B1.3(a)(2) operated to restrict application of these enhancements so that they applied only to offenses that would “group” under the rule in §3D1.2(c).¹¹⁷ Amendment 784 clarified that there was no such restriction; the SOC may apply to “grouping” and “non-grouping” offenses alike.

D. CROSS REFERENCE

The cross reference provides for the use of another guideline “if the defendant used or possessed any firearm or ammunition in connection with the commission or attempted commission of another offense, or possessed or transferred a firearm or ammunition with knowledge or intent that it would be used or possessed in connection with another offense;” and “if the resulting offense level is greater than that determined above.”

Application Note 14(C) defines “another offense” for purposes of this provision as “any federal, state, or local offense, other than the explosive or firearms possession or trafficking offense, regardless of whether a criminal charge was brought, or a conviction obtained.” Subsection (c)(1)(A) directs the sentencing court to apply §2X1.1 “in respect to that other offense . . .” If death resulted, subsection (c)(1)(B) directs the sentencing court to use the most analogous homicide offense guideline.

As noted above, Amendment 784 resolved a circuit split over whether the cross reference (and the related (b)(6)(B) SOC) could be applied only to “groupable” offenses by clarifying that there was no such limitation. Amendment 784 also, however, restricted the application of the (c)(1) cross reference to situations where the firearm involved in the cross reference offense was the same firearm (or one of the same firearms) “cited in the

United States v. Condren, 18 F.3d 1190, 1197–98 (5th Cir. 1994) (distinguished in *Jeffries* because in *Condren* defendant was involved in drug trafficking).

¹¹⁶ See United States v. Jarvis, 814 F.3d 936, 938 (8th Cir. 2016) (enhancement appropriate even though felony offense was not trafficking because defendant left home with heroin and a loaded firearm in the same pocket and defendant had prior drug distribution conviction).

¹¹⁷ Compare United States v. Horton, 693 F.3d 463, 478–79 (4th Cir. 2012) (holding that the (c)(1) cross reference could not be applied to the non-grouping offense of murder) with United States v. Kulick, 629 F.3d 165, 170 (3d Cir. 2010) (holding that the (c)(1) cross reference could be applied to the non-grouping offense of extortion).

offense of conviction.” Note that this restriction applies only to the cross reference and not to the (b)(6)(B) SOC.

The cross reference also applies if the defendant possessed or transferred a firearm “with knowledge or intent” that the firearm would be used or possessed in connection with another offense. Where the cross reference is applied because the defendant knew it would be used or possessed in connection with another offense, the defendant need not have known what specific offense was going to be committed, only that another offense was going to be committed. However, note that while the 4-level enhancement at §2K2.1(b)(6) can apply if the defendant possessed or transferred a firearm with “reason to believe” that it would be used in connection with another felony offense, the cross reference requires knowledge or intent.

If the cross reference directs the court to a guideline that itself contains a firearm enhancement, courts have generally held that the firearm enhancement should be applied.¹¹⁸

E. DEPARTURES

The commentary to the guideline suggests upward departures in several different circumstances. Application Note 7 suggests that, when the offense involves a destructive device, an upward departure may be warranted when “the type of destructive device involved, the risk to the public welfare, or the risk of death or serious bodily injury that the destructive device created” are not adequately accounted for by the guideline. By way of example, the application note contrasts “a pipe bomb in a populated train station” with “an incendiary device in an isolated area” because the former presents “a substantially greater risk of death or serious bodily injury” than the latter. The application note also references several specific upward departures in Chapter Five that might apply in such cases, including §§5K2.1 (Death), 5K2.2 (Physical Injury), and 5K2.14 (Public Welfare).

Application Note 11 suggests three other circumstances that may warrant an upward departure. The first is where the number of firearms involved in the offense “substantially exceeded 200.” The second is where multiple weapons of particular types are involved: specifically, NFA weapons, “military type assault rifles, [and] non-detectable (‘plastic’) firearms.” The third is where the offense involves “large quantities of armor-piercing ammunition.”

¹¹⁸ See *United States v. Webb*, 665 F.3d 1380 (11th Cir. 2012); *United States v. Patterson*, 947 F.2d 635 (2d Cir. 1991); *United States v. Wheelwright*, 918 F.2d 226 (1st Cir. 1990). *But see* *United States v. Concepcion*, 983 F.2d 369 (2d Cir. 1992) (“astronomical” increase in defendant’s offense level from applying cross reference provisions required remand to district court to consider whether a departure was warranted).

IV. GUIDELINE ENHANCEMENTS FOR FIREARMS OUTSIDE §2K2.1

The guidelines provide for increased offense levels through specific offense characteristics that penalize a range of firearm-related conduct.

A. SECTION 2D1.1(B)(1) - POSSESSION OF FIREARM DURING COMMISSION OF DRUG OFFENSE

In §2D1.1(b), the drug trafficking guideline, two offense levels are added if a firearm was possessed during a drug trafficking offense. These levels are added if a firearm was present unless it is clearly improbable the weapon was connected with the offense.¹¹⁹

Section 2D1.1(b)(1) applies where the defendant possesses a firearm in connection with unlawful drug activities. Possession can be actual or constructive, meaning the defendant is able to exercise control or dominion over the firearm.¹²⁰ Presence, not use, is the determining factor.¹²¹ However, application of the §2D1.1(b)(1) enhancement may constitute impermissible double punishment if it is levied in conjunction with a sentence for violating 18 U.S.C. § 924(c).¹²²

In most circuits, the government must first show the firearm was present when the unlawful activity occurred. The burden then shifts to the defendant to prove it was “clearly improbable” that the weapon had a nexus with the unlawful activity.¹²³ In conspiracy

¹¹⁹ See USSG §2D1.1, comment. (n.11).

¹²⁰ *United States v. Rea*, 621 F.3d 595, 606 (7th Cir. 2010) (“The defendant need not have actual possession of the weapon; constructive possession is sufficient.”) (internal citations omitted) *United States v. Keszthelyi*, 308 F.3d 557, 578 (6th Cir. 2002) (“Constructive possession of a firearm is sufficient and may be established by defendant’s ownership, dominion, or control over the item itself, or dominion over the premises where the item is located.”) (internal citation and quotation marks omitted); *United States v. Haren*, 952 F.2d 190, 198 (8th Cir. 1991) (“To receive an enhanced sentence, the defendant need not actually have the weapon in hand; constructive possession is sufficient.”).

¹²¹ See, e.g., *United States v. Smythe*, 363 F.3d 127, 129 (2d Cir. 2004) (“The [g]uideline is a *per se* rule that does not require a case-by-case determination that firearm possession made a particular transaction more dangerous.”); *United States v. Manigan*, 592 F.3d 621, 629 (4th Cir. 2010) (“[G]uns found in close proximity to drug activity are presumptively connected to that activity.” (quoting *United States v. Corral*, 324 F.3d 866, 873 (7th Cir. 2003))).

¹²² See, e.g., *United States v. Cervantes*, 706 F.3d 603 (5th Cir. 2013).

¹²³ See, e.g., *United States v. Solorio*, 337 F.3d 580 (6th Cir. 2003) (the government has the initial burden of showing by a preponderance of the evidence that the defendant possessed the firearm; thereafter, the burden shifts to the defendant to demonstrate that it was clearly improbable that the weapon was connected to the offense); *United States v. Salado*, 339 F.3d 285 (5th Cir. 2003) (the government has the burden of proof under §2D1.1 of showing by a preponderance of the evidence that a temporal and spatial relation existed between the weapon, the drug trafficking activity, and the defendant); *United States v. Drozdowski*, 313 F.3d 819 (3d

cases, the reasonable foreseeability that a weapon may be present can be enough to prove possession.¹²⁴

In *United States v. Belitz*, the defendant argued he was not the owner of the gun used to increase his offense level in drug offense.¹²⁵ His friend had asked him to repair the gun, and the defendant had it in the room for the friend to pick up. The court found lack of ownership and an innocent reason for possession were irrelevant in determining whether this enhancement applied. The gun was loaded and accessible, and the defendant knew there were drugs in the house. The defendant had not shown that it was clearly improbable that the gun was connected to the drug activity.

B. SECTION 2B3.1(B)(2)—ROBBERY

In §2B3.1, the robbery guideline, a specific offense characteristic provides for increases of three to seven offense levels where a firearm or dangerous weapon was involved in the robbery. The particular increase depends on the type of firearm or weapon and the way the defendant involved the firearm; *i.e.*, whether the firearm was simply possessed during the course of the robbery or whether the defendant used a firearm to threaten or coerce a victim. The different factual scenarios that arise in such cases have presented application issues for the enhancement; some of these are discussed below.

Cir. 2002) (courts rely on a number of factors in making the “clearly improbable” determination, including: (i) the type of gun involved; (ii) whether the gun was loaded; (iii) whether the gun was stored near the drugs or drug paraphernalia; and (iv) whether the gun was accessible).

¹²⁴ *United States v. Villarreal*, 613 F.3d 1344, 1359 (11th Cir. 2010) (“A co-conspirator’s possession of a firearm may be attributed to the defendant for purposes of this enhancement if his possession of the firearm was reasonably foreseeable by the defendant, occurred while he was a member of the conspiracy, and was in furtherance of the conspiracy.”); *United States v. Nelson-Rodriguez*, 319 F.3d 12 (1st Cir. 2003) (the prosecution does not have to show that the defendant or his co-conspirators actually used the gun in perpetrating the offense or intended to do so); *United States v. Perez-Guerrero*, 334 F.3d 778 (8th Cir. 2003) (for §2D1.1(b)(1) to apply, the government must demonstrate by a preponderance of the evidence that (i) a weapon was present and (ii) it was not “clearly improbable” that the weapon had a nexus with the conspiracy); *United States v. Mendoza*, 341 F.3d 687 (8th Cir. 2003) (constructive possession suffices if it is reasonably foreseeable that a co-conspirator would have possessed a weapon); *United States v. Topete-Plascencia*, 351 F.3d 454 (10th Cir. 2003) (in a drug conspiracy case, the government is not required to prove that the defendant personally possessed the firearm if the possession of weapons was known to the defendant or reasonably foreseeable to him).

¹²⁵ 141 F.3d 815 (8th Cir. 1998).

1. Weapon “Discharged,” “Brandished or Possessed,” or “Otherwise Used”

In applying the weapon enhancement to a robbery offense, one question is whether the firearm, or the dangerous weapon, was merely “brandished” or whether it was “otherwise used” in the course of the robbery. The general rule is that “brandishing” constitutes an implicit threat that force might be used, while a firearm or dangerous weapon is “otherwise used” when the threat becomes more explicit.¹²⁶ In other words, the difference between “brandishing” and “otherwise used” is a difference based on the seriousness of the charged criminal conduct.¹²⁷ The guideline creates a hierarchy of culpability for varying degrees of involvement during the criminal offense.¹²⁸

The First Circuit has explained the difference between “brandishing” and “otherwise used” by stating that “specifically leveling a cocked firearm at the head or body of a bank teller or customer, ordering them to move or be quiet according to one’s direction, is a cessation of ‘brandishing’ and the commencement of ‘otherwise used.’”¹²⁹ The Fifth Circuit articulated a similar distinction: “Displaying a weapon without pointing or targeting should be classified as ‘brandished,’ but pointing the weapon at any individual or group of individuals in a specific manner should be ‘otherwise used.’”¹³⁰ Other appellate courts have reached similar conclusions.¹³¹

On its face, §2B3.1(b)(2)(E) refers only to weapons that are dangerous; however, the commentary in Application Note 2 directs sentencing courts to impose a 3-level enhancement whenever a harmless object that appears to be a dangerous weapon is brandished, displayed, or possessed by the defendant. In determining whether an enhancement applies under §2B3.1(b)(2)(E), most circuits apply an objective standard in determining whether an object may be considered a dangerous weapon for the purpose of this subsection.¹³² In other words, the ultimate inquiry is whether a reasonable individual would believe that the object is a dangerous weapon under the circumstances.

¹²⁶ See *United States v. Johnson*, 199 F.3d 123 (3d Cir. 1999).

¹²⁷ See *United States v. Miller*, 206 F.3d 1051, 1053 (11th Cir. 2000).

¹²⁸ See *United States v. Wooden*, 169 F.3d 674, 675 (11th Cir. 1999).

¹²⁹ *United States v. LaFortune*, 192 F.3d 157, 161–62 (1st Cir. 1999).

¹³⁰ *United States v. Dunigan*, 555 F.3d 501, 505 (5th Cir. 2009).

¹³¹ See, e.g., *United States v. Orr*, 312 F.3d 141 (3d Cir. 2002) (holding a gun to someone’s head is sufficient to trigger the enhancement—infliction of physical violence or a verbalized threat is not required to trigger the enhancement); *United States v. Wooden*, 169 F.3d 674, 676 (11th Cir. 1999) (pointing a handgun at the victim’s head one-half inch away constituted “otherwise used”); *United States v. Johnson*, 199 F.3d 123 (3d Cir. 1999) (a threat to hit an employee with a baseball bat is sufficient to trigger the enhancement); *United States v. Taylor*, 135 F.3d 478, 482–83 (7th Cir. 1998) (poking a gun into the bank employee’s back while directing her to produce money was “otherwise use” of that weapon).

¹³² See *United States v. Rodriguez*, 301 F.3d 666, 668 (6th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Hart*, 226 F.3d 602, 606 (7th Cir. 2000); *United States v. Dixon*, 982 F.2d 116, 124 (3d Cir. 1992); *United States v. Taylor*, 960 F.2d

The Sixth Circuit applied this enhancement where a defendant brought a Styrofoam sandwich box into a bank asserting it was a bomb.¹³³ In arriving at its conclusion, the Sixth Circuit relied on the Seventh Circuit's holding in *United States v. Hart*, where the court upheld a §2B3.1(b)(2)(E) enhancement when the defendant robbed multiple banks by claiming in each instance that he was carrying a bomb in a box, including a lunch box on one occasion and a shoe box that was wrapped inside a bag on another—none of the boxes in fact contained an explosive device.¹³⁴

The Fourth Circuit, joining the Third and Eleventh Circuits, held that a concealed hand may serve as an object that appears to be a dangerous weapon, and therefore trigger a §2B3.1(b)(2)(E) enhancement.¹³⁵

The Eighth Circuit concluded that a §2B3.1(b)(2)(E) enhancement was inapplicable where a defendant concealed an inoperable replica of a gun, which was possessed during the commission of a robbery, but never used in any way.¹³⁶ The court noted that the only reason it knew the defendant had an inoperable replica gun was because he admitted it to the police; therefore, not only did the defendant lack the actual ability to harm anyone during the robbery, but no one knew he had on his person an object that might have appeared to be dangerous.¹³⁷ Accordingly, a §2B3.1(b)(2)(E) enhancement was inappropriate.

2. *If a "Threat of Death" was Made*

Prior to the 1997 amendment of this guideline, there was a split among the circuits as to what constituted an "express threat of death." This issue arose when the courts were confronted with a robbery where the defendant would either hand a note to the teller stating "I have a gun," or he would state "I have a gun." Most circuits held that the

115, 116 (9th Cir. 1992). *But see* *United States v. Bates*, 213 F.3d 1336 (11th Cir. 2000) (relying on the intent of the perpetrator and the subjective perception of the teller).

¹³³ *See* *United States v. Rodriguez*, 301 F.3d 666, 669 (6th Cir. 2002).

¹³⁴ 226 F.3d 602 (7th Cir. 2000).

¹³⁵ *See* *United States v. Davis*, 635 F.3d 1222 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (deciding that a hand concealed in a backpack creates the appearance of a dangerous weapon); *United States v. Souther*, 221 F.3d 626, 628–29 (4th Cir. 2000) (holding a concealed hand appeared to be a dangerous weapon because defendant presented a note stating he had a gun); *United States v. Vincent*, 121 F.3d 1451, 1455 (11th Cir. 1997) (stating concealed hand appeared to be a dangerous weapon because it was pressed into the victim's side); *United States v. Dixon*, 982 F.2d 116, 121–124 (3d Cir. 1992) (noting the concealed hand appeared to be a dangerous weapon because it was draped with a towel).

¹³⁶ *United States v. Hutton*, 252 F.3d 1013, 1017 (8th Cir. 2001).

¹³⁷ *Id.*

defendant need not have expressed in words or actions an intention “to kill,” provided the words or actions employed were such as to place the victim in objectively reasonable fear for his or her life. On the other hand, the Sixth and Eleventh Circuits held that the term “express” contemplated nothing less than the defendant unambiguously declaring, either through words or unambiguous conduct, that he intended to kill the victim.¹³⁸

Effective November 1, 1997, the Commission resolved this conflict by deleting the word “express” and requiring only a “threat of death.”¹³⁹ The amendment adopted the “majority appellate view which holds that the enhancement applies when the combination of the defendant’s actions and words would instill in a reasonable person in the position of the immediate victim a greater amount of fear than necessary to commit the robbery.”¹⁴⁰ The deletion of the term “express” from §2B3.1(b)(2)(F) broadened the application of this enhancement.¹⁴¹

Since the 1997 amendment, all circuits agree that the statement “I have a gun” constitutes a “threat of death,” and qualifies for a 2-level enhancement even though no express threat to use a gun is made. The Sixth and Eleventh Circuits have acknowledged that their pre-amendment interpretations of §2B3.1(b)(2)(F) are no longer good law.¹⁴²

C. SECTION 2B5.1—OFFENSES INVOLVING COUNTERFEIT BEARER OBLIGATIONS OF THE U.S.

In §2B5.1, the counterfeiting bearer obligations guideline, two offense levels are added if a firearm is used in connection with the offense. If the resulting offense level is less than 13, it is increased to level 13. Bearer obligations include currency and coins, food and postage stamps, and other items generally described as bearer obligations of the United States.¹⁴³

The Third Circuit applied this firearm enhancement in *United States v. Gregory*.¹⁴⁴ In *Gregory*, the defendant claimed he forgot about a gun in his jacket pocket when he

¹³⁸ See *United States v. Alexander*, 88 F.3d 427 (6th Cir. 1996); *United States v. Moore*, 6 F.3d 715 (11th Cir. 1993).

¹³⁹ See USSG App. C, amend. 552 (1997).

¹⁴⁰ *Id.*

¹⁴¹ See *United States v. Soto-Martinez*, 317 F.3d 477, 479 (5th Cir. 2003); *United States v. Day*, 272 F.3d 216 (3d Cir. 2001).

¹⁴² See *United States v. Winbush*, 296 F.3d 442 (6th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Murphy*, 306 F.3d 1087, 1090 (11th Cir. 2002).

¹⁴³ See USSG §2B5.1, comment. (n.2).

¹⁴⁴ 345 F.3d 225 (3d Cir. 2003).

passed counterfeit currency. The district court applied the firearm enhancement under §2B5.1(b)(4), stating prior circuit case law mandated it.¹⁴⁵ The defendant argued the district court must first resolve the factual dispute over whether he possessed the handgun “in connection with” the instant offense. The appeals court stated that for the purposes of §2B5.1 a causal, logical, or other type of relationship must exist between the firearm and instant offense to apply the enhancement.¹⁴⁶

V. STANDARD OF PROOF

A. STATUTES

Guilt on the statutory offenses must be established by guilty plea or by a verdict “beyond a reasonable doubt.” Section 924(e) is a mandatory sentencing enhancement that does not have to be charged. In contrast, section 924(c) describes an offense that must be charged, not a mere sentencing enhancement.

B. GUIDELINES

The particular showing that must be made with respect to each specific offense characteristic varies, but like all sentencing factors, the standard of proof is a preponderance of the evidence.

C. CODEFENDANT OR CO-CONSPIRATOR LIABILITY

In practice, defendants are not usually held accountable under section 924(c) for firearms that they did not personally use or carry, although there is no legal impediment to holding them criminally liable under the law of conspiracy for an accomplice’s foreseeable use or possession of a firearm during the conspiracy to commit the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime.¹⁴⁷ By contrast, under the guidelines, courts are required to apply

¹⁴⁵ See *United States v. Loney*, 219 F.3d 281 (3d Cir. 2000) (affirming the firearm enhancement under §2K2.1(b)(5) where court found a connection between illicit drugs and the loaded firearm the defendant possessed).

¹⁴⁶ *Id.* at 285.

¹⁴⁷ See, e.g., *United States v. Shea*, 150 F.3d 44 (1st Cir. 1998) (*recognized as abrogated on other grounds*, *United States v. Mojica-Baez*, 229 F.3d 292 (1st Cir. 2000)); *United States v. Wilson*, 135 F.3d 291 (4th Cir. 1998); *United States v. Washington*, 106 F.3d 983 (D.C. Cir. 1997); *United States v. Washington*, 106 F.3d

the specific offense characteristics based on a defendant's relevant conduct, which generally includes all reasonably foreseeable acts and omissions of others in furtherance of jointly undertaken criminal activity.¹⁴⁸

VI. APPLICATION ISSUES RELATED TO 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)

A. INTERACTION OF FIREARMS ENHANCEMENTS AND SECTION 924(c)

No defendant receives both a guideline enhancement for firearms and the mandatory consecutive sentence for section 924(c) based on the same firearm, as the guideline specifically directs that the specific offense characteristics for firearms not be applied when the defendant is convicted of a section 924(c) violation.¹⁴⁹ Courts have held that this note plainly prohibits an enhancement for possession of any firearm—whether it be the one directly involved in the underlying offense or another firearm, even one in a different location. “If the court imposes a sentence for a drug offense along with a consecutive sentence under 18 U.S.C. § 924(c) based on that drug offense, it simply cannot enhance the sentence for the drug offense for possession of any firearm.”¹⁵⁰ The same prohibition applies to fake firearms.¹⁵¹ And the death threat enhancement is inapplicable when related to the firearm that forms the basis of a section 924(c) sentence.¹⁵²

Before 2000, some courts added the enhancement in addition to the section 924(c) sentence where defendant had multiple firearms or when a codefendant also possessed a firearm.¹⁵³ However, Amendment 599 changed the language in Application Note 4 to

1488 (9th Cir. 1997); *United States v. Masotto*, 73 F.3d 1233 (2d Cir. 1996); *United States v. Myers*, 102 F.3d 227 (6th Cir. 1996); *United States v. Wacker*, 72 F.3d 1453 (10th Cir. 1995).

¹⁴⁸ See, e.g., *United States v. Block*, 705 F.3d 755 (7th Cir. 2013).

¹⁴⁹ See USSG §2K2.4, comment. (n.4).

¹⁵⁰ See *United States v. Knobloch*, 131 F.3d 366 (3d Cir. 1997).

¹⁵¹ See *United States v. Eubanks*, 593 F.3d 645, 649–650 (7th Cir. 2010) (remanding for resentencing because the enhancement at §2B3.1(b)(2)(D) is not applicable to a “plastic B.B. gun”).

¹⁵² See *United States v. Katalinic*, 510 F.3d 744, 748 (7th Cir. 2007) (joining the Fourth and Sixth Circuit holding the same); see also *United States v. Hazelwood*, 398 F.3d 792, 798–800 (6th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Reevey*, 364 F.3d 151, 158–159 (4th Cir. 2004).

¹⁵³ See, e.g., *United States v. Willett*, 90 F.3d 404, 408 (9th Cir. 1996) (2-level enhancement on top of the section 924(c)(1) conviction proper where defendant committed drug trafficking offense with multiple weapons); *United States v. Washington*, 44 F.3d 1271, 1280–81 (5th Cir. 1995) (enhancement on top of section 924(c) conviction proper where accomplice in the crime had another gun); accord, *United States v. Kimmons*, 965 F.2d 1001, 1011 (11th Cir. 1992), cert. granted, judgment vacated on other grounds, *Small v. United States*, 508 U.S. 902 (1993).

§2K2.4 to clarify that this application was not what the Commission intended, and courts have recognized that this addition is improper.¹⁵⁴

B. OFFENSES UNDER SECTION 924(c) AND GROUPING

Because 18 U.S.C. § 924(c) requires that any sentence imposed under that statute run consecutive to any other sentence imposed, 18 U.S.C. § 924(c) counts may not group with any other count charged. This is reflected in the guidelines at §5G1.2(a), which provides that sentences such offenses “shall be determined by that statute and imposed independently.”

By 2014, a circuit split had arisen over when other counts impacted by the section 924(c) count themselves may be grouped. The question was whether, if a firearms enhancement in a guideline like §2D1.1 that would otherwise be applicable is not applied due to the presence of the section 924(c) count, should the §2D1.1 count still group with other, non-section 924(c) counts?

Ordinarily, §3D1.2(c) directs that offenses should be “grouped” when they reflect “substantially the same harm,” a condition that is met “when one of the counts embodies conduct that is treated as a specific offense characteristic in, or other adjustment to, the guideline applicable to another of the counts.”¹⁵⁵ In a case involving a § 924(c) conviction, however, §2K2.4 provides that “if a sentence [for the 924(c)] conviction] is imposed in conjunction with a sentence for an underlying offense, do not apply the specific offense characteristic” for use of a firearm in connection with the underlying offense that would otherwise apply.¹⁵⁶ Thus, a defendant with a § 924(c) conviction, a drug conviction, and a felon-in-possession conviction will not receive the otherwise applicable SOC at §2D1.1(b)(1) for possessing a firearm in connection with the drug offense, or the SOC at §2K2.1(b)(6)(B) for using a firearm in connection with another felony offense.

In October 2014, the Seventh Circuit held this means that, for a § 924(c) defendant, the drug and felon-in-possession offenses should no longer “group” under the “same harm” rule of §3D1.2(c), because those two offenses no longer embody conduct “treated as” an SOC in the other guideline.¹⁵⁷ Previously, the Eighth Circuit had reached a conflicting

¹⁵⁴ See, e.g., *United States v. Aquino*, 242 F.3d 859, 864–65 (9th Cir. 2001).

¹⁵⁵ USSG §3D1.2(c).

¹⁵⁶ USSG §2K2.4 comment. (n.4).

¹⁵⁷ *United States v. Sinclair*, 770 F.3d 1148, 1158 (7th Cir. 2014).

conclusion, holding that the drug and felon-in-possession offenses should still be grouped even when a defendant also has a § 924(c) conviction.¹⁵⁸

VII. CRIMES OF VIOLENCE AND DRUG TRAFFICKING OFFENSES AS PRIOR OFFENSES

As noted in the discussion of §2K2.1, that guideline incorporates by reference the definitions of the terms “crime of violence” and “drug trafficking offense” from §4B1.2, the Career Offender guideline. Although a thorough treatment of all the case law surrounding these definitions is beyond the scope of this primer, the following sections describe some basic concepts and issues that arise in applying these definitions.

A. RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER GUIDELINE AND STATUTORY DEFINITIONS OF THE TERMS

As noted in Section II.B of this primer, there is a close relationship between the definition of the term “violent felony” as that term is used in the ACCA and the term “crime of violence” as that term is used in §4B1.2. When applying these definitions, it is important to be aware that there are other uses of the term “crime of violence” in other parts of the guidelines and the U.S. Code, so careful attention to the specific definition being analyzed is particularly important. For example, 18 U.S.C. § 16 defines the term “crime of violence” in a way that is different from the guidelines’ definition of the term in §4B1.2, although many of the same offenses are treated similarly under each definition. Additionally, Application Note 1(B)(iii) to §2L1.2 of the guidelines defines the term “crime of violence” for purposes of that guideline’s specific offense characteristics. A similar situation exists with respect to the definitions of “drug trafficking offense” and “controlled substance offense” under various statutes and guidelines, so similar attention must be paid when applying those definitions.

B. DEFINITIONS IN §4B1.2

1. *Crime of Violence*

For an offense to qualify as a crime of violence under §4B1.2, it must have been “punishable by a term of imprisonment exceeding one year.” The term “punishable” signifies that the defendant himself need not have received a sentence in excess of one

¹⁵⁸ See *United States v. Bell*, 477 F.3d 607, 616 (8th Cir. 2007); see also *United States v. Gibbs*, 395 F. App’x 248 (6th Cir. 2010); *United States v. King*, 201 F. App’x 715 (11th Cir. 2006) (reaching the same conclusion in unpublished opinions).

year; rather, the particular statute of conviction must have carried a possible penalty of greater than one year. The conviction may be under state or federal law.

The definition encompasses two basic types of offenses. One type is an offense that has as an *element* of the offense “the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person of another.” These may be, for example, robbery offenses that are defined as taking property from the person of another using physical force. The second type are the offenses that are enumerated, namely murder, voluntary manslaughter, kidnapping, aggravated assault, a forcible sex offense, robbery, arson, extortion, or the use or unlawful possession of a firearm described in 26 U.S.C. §5845(a) or explosive material as defined in 18 U.S.C. §841(c).¹⁵⁹

The categorical approach described at Section II.B above applies to determinations of crimes of violence as well. Application Note 1 also provides that convictions for aiding and abetting, conspiring, and attempting to commit crimes of violence are themselves crimes of violence.¹⁶⁰

2. Controlled Substance Offense

A controlled substance offense under §4B1.2, like a crime of violence, must be punishable by a term of imprisonment of more than one year, and may be a violation of state or federal law.

Two basic types of drug offenses qualify: those that involve “the manufacture, import, export, distribution or dispensing” of drugs (or a counterfeit substance), and those that involve possession with “intent to manufacture, import, export, distribute or dispense” the drugs (or a counterfeit substance). Again, the categorical approach described at Section II.B above applies. Application Note 1 provides that convictions for aiding and abetting, conspiring, and attempting to commit controlled substance offenses are themselves controlled substance offenses.

¹⁵⁹ App C., amend 798 (effect. Aug. 1 2016).

¹⁶⁰ See USSG §4B1.2 comment (n.1).