

## Terrifying Things I Learned While Buying Guns on Facebook

We're not about to take sides in America's ongoing gun debate (we do try to look at it from both sides and point out the parts nobody wants to talk about). But most people agree that in a perfect world, there'd be a few obstacles in between, say, a disturbed teen and a brand-new assault rifle.

But when journalist Harmon Leon posed as an extremely creepy person with cash in hand, he found that it's alarmingly easy to get some of the most dangerous weapons in the world with nothing more than an Internet connection. We're not talking about some kind of "dark web" black market stuff, either. We're saying that even if you're a hilariously shady parody of a person ...

### You Can Buy Guns on Facebook

Before we get to how I pretended to be the world's most ridiculously creepy gun buyer on the Internet, we have to explain why all of this is possible:

The reason there are literally as many guns as there are people in the USA is that buying one is easier than getting a payday loan. Of course, there are rules -- you can't purchase guns across state lines, and obviously you can't sell guns to children. I mean, that would be nuts. Yet, there appears to be a teeny tiny little loophole there: when a 15-year-old Kentucky boy was recently arrested with a loaded 9mm handgun outside his school's homecoming football game, he told authorities that he got it off Facebook.

That's right: this isn't the infamous "Deep Web" where you can hire a hitman or buy a human baby. Facebook -- as in, the place where grandmothers and grandchildren trade happy birthday messages -- is crawling with enough assault rifles to overthrow a Central American country.

The sellers have their own fan pages, so all takes is a search. Sure, some of these dealers claim they are only interested in selling their guns through a licensed firearms dealer. But devote a few minutes to looking and you'll soon find someone not only willing to sell you a gun but to do so in a way that avoids any pesky background check.

One of the first guys I met only wanted to sell his Glock the legit way (via a FFL, or Federal Firearms License holder), but if you throw \$20 at him, he'll meet somewhere in Pittsburgh and hand it off to a stranger. See, where most people agree there should be some kind of background checks so that there are more hoops between crazy people/terrorists and owning an AK-47 than just handing over a few hundred dollars, some 40 percent of all gun buyers avoid a background check entirely. That's because private sales between individuals aren't really regulated (particularly "face-to-face" sales), so to make your gun-selling operation legal you just ... don't call yourself a dealer. At that point the only rule is that you can't sell to somebody who you know wouldn't pass a background check (that is, felons, the mentally ill, toddlers, etc.). But you also don't have to ask them.

## Some Sellers Are Fine Selling to Anyone

OK, so the Internet is a huge unregulated market, and nearly half of all gun sales in the entire country happen without a background check. But hey, surely anyone selling a gun would be on guard for the kind of creepy behavior that might signal someone as a potential nutjob.

To find out, I decided to simply "like" the Facebook page "Guns for Sale" (no mincing words in that title). The page features a long quote from George Washington, the customary simple-minded proclamation from the NRA ("*The only thing that will stop bad guys with guns is good guys with guns*"), and almost a quarter-million followers.

I'm told to:

"Post your gun for sale along with DESCRIPTION, PHOTO, PRICE, and CONTACT INFO, what STATE you are in and we will repost it for millions of potential buyers to see."

I inquired about a listing: "Arsenal AK-47 excellent condition asking \$1200" -- a very reasonable price for a gun similar to this.

A man from Mooresville, North Carolina, responds with the hard sell: "My AK is a very good one, it is model SLR95 milled with chrome lined barrel, muzzle break, optic sights, it is probably the most sought after Arsenal AK model built. circa 1995. Price is pretty firm but I can do some partial trading." By way of a personal note, he adds: "Anything that goes boom interests me."

I responded that "circa 1995" was my very favorite year for AK-47s -- and that I needed immediate shipment for *something I had planned*.

After some email bartering, the seller provided his PayPal information and agreed to overnight shipping. "When you send the PayPal, send as a gift to a family member so I won't get a fee and neither will you!" (I considered this a very thoughtful gesture.) No background check, no questions asked about my suspiciously urgent need for the weapon (maybe someone was in the process of breaking into my house, and my plan was to just hide in the closet until the FedEx guy arrived?)

## Overt Creepiness Will Not Disqualify You

The next one that caught my eye was: "Like NEW Remington 870 with tactical accessories, 12 Gauge Pump Action."

Since it's illegal to ship across state lines -- let alone without the benefit of a background check and ID -- I made my location clear when I emailed the Remington seller, who was somewhere in Texas:

"I'm interested!!! I'm located in NY! I'm willing to put down a deposit. P.S. If you have any other friends who are selling guns, I want to buy them as well!"

A few hours later, I hear from a man named John: "The gun is still available for now. I am in Texas willing to ship. The gun is in excellent condition and working perfectly ... I can do it for you \$380 and free

shipping." (More free shipping!) As an added convenience, John asks: "Do you want me to ship the gun straight to your house address?"

I stressed that I needed it ASAP!

John's response: "Cool, I will get the gun packaged for now and prepare it ready for shipment." He requests payment via Western Union -- to speed up the transaction so I can get my shotgun overnight (which suddenly made me wonder: is John a Fed? The Internet can be a tricky place!) I responded: "Lot of scammers on the Internet. I just want to make sure I can get the Remington overnight if I send the money."

But, wow, even though this poor man has been "hurt a lot" selling guns over the Internet, he's willing to overnight me a shotgun I need immediately for some surely-not-terrifying reason. And that's when I found ...

### **Sellers Will Work With You to Get Around Laws**

I wanted to expand my search beyond just guns and into the sort of bullets that would allow someone to pierce an entire SWAT team at once. Currently 11 states have barred the sale or possession of armor-piercing bullets -- including New York, where I happen to live. Breaking these laws will get you anywhere from one month to 10 years in prison, with fines ranging from \$500 to \$15,000. Federal law also prohibits the manufacture, importation, sale, or delivery of armor-piercing ammunition. Which is ridiculous -- what if the guy robbing my house is wearing armor? Or the deer I'm hunting? Fortunately, it's Facebook to the rescue:

"Selling 462 ARMOR PIERCING bullets in reloadable brass cases. These usually sell for \$1.65 or more per bullet. Will sell for \$700 for all or best offer. Shipping costs extra. Located in Columbus Indiana."

I emailed with a sense of urgency: "I need armor-piercing bullets. I need them shipped overnight. As many as you got! Please respond ASAP. I need them fast!"

Within a few hours, I got a delivery quote of \$244 to have those bullets shipped overnight. My response: "That's fantastic!! I live in the Bronx. Very, very important that I get armor-piercing bullets by Wednesday."

Surprisingly, the seller rained on my bullet parade: "I can't ship to New York. Illegal. I would be jeopardizing my shop if I did is what I was informed of by another gun shop there. Sorry."

So maybe the Internet's gun sellers aren't as hilaritragically shady as I thought. But I tried one more (armor-)piercing plea: "Could you ship to North Carolina?"

Bingo: "OK. If you want it shipped to North Carolina it would be there Monday or Tuesday if I ship out tomorrow. If you send money today I'll ship tomorrow. \$700 and I'll cover shipping costs."

On one hand, these guys are operating some of the most customer-friendly businesses I've ever shopped at. On the other hand? Holy crap!

## There's Even a Craigslist for Buying Assault Weapons

In 2011, the New York City police launched an investigation of private online gun sellers and found that 75 out of 125 of the vendors contacted agreed to sell guns to people who straight-up admitted they wouldn't pass a background check. So, let's go online as an obvious candidate for a school shooting and see how far we get. For this, we head to Armslist.

Armslist is kind of like the OKCupid of weaponry; you set up a profile, then click on the long, hard metallic implements that attract you and try to coax the owner into letting it belong to you. It's so simple, even a kid can use it, though they're not allowed to -- just like how kids can't check out porn sites, they're not allowed on Armslist, which clearly states that you must be 18 years old to enter the site to buy that firearm of your dreams and other people's nightmares. The site also has a huge legal disclaimer (I'll paraphrase: "If you buy a gun off of Armslist and use it to shoot someone in the face, Armslist holds no responsibility").

Armslist lets you set up a username. Damn, "GunNut" and "GunCrazy" are already taken! So is "GunsAnd\*\*\*\*\*." Finally I settle on the completely above-board sounding "GunsAndHeroin." OK, I'm ready to shop ...

Posing as a disgruntled high school student who wants to buy a big mama of a gun for his upcoming 18th birthday, I fire away at the listings stating such things as, "I'm really into video games and want to take things to the next level." It takes all of five minutes to get a response from a dealer -- putting on the hard sell. "AR-15 Brand NEW! Plus 100 ROUNDS!!"

"Wicked gun!!!!" I reply in an email with a lot of smiley faces. I add, "I'm about to turn 18 and ready to rock. AR-15 are my fav. How good is the scope? Can you see a target across a football field?"

"Congrats on almost turning 18!" the dealer says in his reply. And then he pees on my underage gun parade: "Gotta be 21 and ship to dealer in your area."

Good man! But then I ask, "Could I get an older brother to buy it? I could bump it up and pay an extra couple hundred." I express concern that I need the assault rifle before school starts back up again.

"I can't legally sell you a gun," he replies. But there's a loophole: "Since it's a rifle we won't need a bill of sale, so if you bring a friend who's over 18. I could sell it to them."

To keep things off the books, the dealer says, he only accepts cash (nothing creepy there!). So, to summarize, all you have to do is arrange to meet a complete stranger to buy firearms while carrying a handful of currency. What could possibly go wrong? I tell the man I'm doing summer school at my high school -- where all my teachers are big dicks -- and could meet him afterward. Bingo -- one assault weapon procured for a fictional underage minor.

So, there you go -- if you've got a smartphone, you're just a few minutes away from a brand-spanking-new AR-15 and the armor-piercing bullets to go with it. God bless America, and the Internet!