

**NONPRECEDENTIAL DISPOSITION**

To be cited only in accordance with FED. R. APP. P. 32.1

**United States Court of Appeals**

**For the Seventh Circuit  
Chicago, Illinois 60604**

Submitted March 3, 2026\*

Decided March 23, 2026

**Before**

DORIS L. PRYOR, *Circuit Judge*

JOSHUA P. KOLAR, *Circuit Judge*

NANCY L. MALDONADO, *Circuit Judge*

No. 25-1201

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,  
*Plaintiff-Appellee,*

*v.*

CHARLES G. DENTON, JR.,  
*Defendant-Appellant.*

Appeal from the United States District  
Court for the Central District of Illinois.

No. 4:20-cr-40048-JEH-1

Jonathan E. Hawley,  
*Judge.*

**ORDER**

Officers executed a search warrant at Charles Denton's home, where they found various drugs, a gun, and ammunition. After a bench trial, he was found guilty of possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug-trafficking crime, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(A). On appeal, he challenges the sufficiency of the evidence to sustain the conviction. He argues that the proximity of the unloaded gun to the drugs is insufficient to infer that the gun was used in furtherance of a drug-trafficking crime. But

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\* By prior order, we granted the parties' joint motion to waive oral argument.

the evidence presented at trial established a sufficient nexus between the gun and the drug-tracking offense, so we affirm.

In 2020, a confidential source informed the Rock Island Police Department that Denton was selling methamphetamine from his home. After conducting surveillance and a controlled buy from Denton, officers executed a search warrant at Denton's home. When officers entered the bedroom, they found Denton weighing methamphetamine on two scales next to his closet. Denton, upon seeing the officers enter his room, dropped a plate containing cocaine at the threshold of the closet. A search of the home revealed methamphetamine, cannabis, cocaine, packaging supplies, cash, a phone, a semi-automatic pistol, and ammunition. The gun and ammunition were discovered wrapped in cloth inside of a bag hanging in the bedroom closet.

During the search, an officer interviewed Denton, who admitted to having sold methamphetamine for about four months and to possession of the drugs and supplies. And while he admitted to having a gun in the house, he told the officer he could not remember where it was, initially saying it might be in his car. The officer asked three times whether the gun was for self-defense, and Denton answered affirmatively. Officers eventually found the gun in the closet, and Denton confirmed that it was his.

Officers later conducted a forensic extraction of the seized phone. The extraction revealed several messages arranging for drug transactions. One message sent two weeks prior to the search of Denton's house contained a photo of the seized gun and three rounds of ammunition with the accompanying text "600 \$."

A grand jury indicted Denton on three charges: possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine, crack cocaine, and cannabis, 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1), (b)(1)(A), (b)(1)(C), and (b)(1)(D) (Count One); possession of a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking, 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(A) (Count Two); and felon in possession of a firearm, 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g), 924(a)(2), and 924(e) (Count Three). Denton pleaded guilty to Counts One and Three.

The court held a bench trial on Count Two. As relevant on appeal, officers testified as to the gun's location in the apartment and their interview with Denton during the search. One officer stated that it would take about one minute to load the gun and that drug dealers typically have guns to protect "their drugs and their business." Further, in explaining why he asked Denton if he had a gun in self-defense, the officer testified that because dealers are frequently robbed, they often have guns for

protection. The officer also stated that there had been several robberies and homicides of drug dealers in Rock Island.

The court found Denton guilty on Count Two, the Section 924(c) charge. In its explanation, the court noted the close proximity of Denton's "workstation" (the bedroom dresser) to the closet where the gun was found. The court reasoned that "a fact-finder reasonably may infer that a defendant's possession of a gun was intended to 'further' his drug operation if he 'strategically placed' the gun near a cache of drugs, making the gun readily available to protect 'himself, his drugs, and his ongoing drug trafficking business.'" *United States v. Beard*, 187 F. App'x 608, 609 (7th Cir. 2006); *United States v. Castillo*, 406 F.3d 806, 816 (7th Cir. 2005). The court also appeared skeptical of Denton's claim that he did not know where the gun was, observing that two weeks earlier he had sent pictures of the gun and ammunition to a potential customer.

The court sentenced Denton to 120 months' incarceration on both Counts One and Three to run concurrently, and 60 months' incarceration on Count Two to run consecutively. It also imposed 60 months' supervised release on Counts One and Two, and 36 months' supervised release on Count Three, all to run concurrently.

On appeal, Denton challenges his conviction for Count Two, contesting the sufficiency of the evidence that he possessed a gun in furtherance of a drug-trafficking crime. In raising a sufficiency-of-the-evidence challenge, he faces a heavy burden. *See United States v. Farmer*, 38 F.4th 591, 602 (7th Cir. 2022). This court views the evidence in the light most favorable to the prosecution and overturns a conviction only if "no rational trier of fact could have found the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt." *United States v. Medina*, 969 F.3d 819, 821 (7th Cir. 2020) (citation omitted).

Denton argues that the government presented insufficient evidence to support his conviction under § 924(c)(1)(A). Specifically, he contends that the government failed to provide evidence linking his firearm to drug dealing. *See United States v. Huddleston*, 593 F.3d 596, 602 (7th Cir. 2010) (holding there must be a sufficient nexus between the firearm and the drug-selling operation). Denton's appeal focuses on the accessibility of the firearm and its proximity to the drugs, highlighting that the gun was found wrapped in a bag inside of the closet, and that there was no evidence of the gun being used during any transactions. To distinguish between mere possession of a firearm and possession in furtherance of a drug crime, courts may consider factors such as:

(1) the type of drug activity that is being conducted; (2) accessibility of the firearm; (3) the type of weapon possessed; (4) whether the weapon is stolen; (5) the status of the possession (legitimate or illegal); (6) whether the gun is loaded; (7) proximity to drugs or drug profits; and (8) the time and circumstances under which the gun is found.

*United States v. Maxwell*, 143 F.4th 844, 858–59 (7th Cir. 2025) (citation omitted).

But looking at these factors holistically, as the court must, *see United States v. Perryman*, 20 F.4th 1127, 1134 (7th Cir. 2021), there was sufficient evidence for the district court to find that Denton possessed the gun “in furtherance” of his drug crime. Officers found Denton in his bedroom with several controlled substances that were packaged individually for sale. The substances and other drug-dealing accoutrements were found on his dresser next to where he was standing and inside the closet. Officers found the gun and ammunition in the bedroom closet, located directly next to the dresser. *See, e.g., Perryman*, 20 F.4th at 1134–35 (concluding that a gun in a closet “three to four steps away” from narcotics was used to protect the drugs). Denton was close enough to the closet that when officers entered, he dropped a plate of narcotics into the threshold of the closet. And although the gun was not stolen, his status as a felon made its possession unlawful. While Denton argues that the gun was not immediately accessible, it was close enough that the factfinder could rationally conclude it was “strategically placed” near his workstation and thus in furtherance of a drug operation. *See Castillo*, 406 F.3d at 815–16.

And though Denton contends there is no evidence that the weapon was ever used during a drug transaction, Count Two alleges possession with intent to distribute, not distribution. Thus, the required “nexus” between the firearm and the drug-trafficking crime, *see Huddleston*, 593 F.3d at 602, is broader than transactions alone. *United States v. Mitten*, 592 F.3d 767, 777 (7th Cir. 2010). The evidence needs to show only that the “possession of the gun was intended for the protection of his money and his stash.” *Id.* at 778.

Here, the evidence shows that when an officer asked about the weapon, Denton confirmed that it was for self-defense. And at trial, officers testified that it is common for drug dealers to have a gun to protect themselves and their drugs. Based on this evidence, a rational factfinder could find that Denton possessed the gun to protect himself and his drugs in furtherance of his drug-trafficking enterprise.

AFFIRMED