

## Firearms in K-12 Schools: What is the Responsibility of the Education Community?

by Sonali Rajan, Lalitha Vasudevan, Kelly Ruggles, Brande Brown & Helen Verdeli – October 05, 2017

*This commentary investigates the role and responsibility of schools and surrounding communities in keeping students and faculty safe from gun violence on K-12 campuses.*

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 1999, one of the deadliest school shootings in American history took place in Columbine, Colorado. Since then, more than half a million Americans have been killed with guns, whether in homicides, suicides, or other circumstances (CDC, 2016a). The U.S. experiences gun homicides at a rate nearly 25 times greater than other developed nations (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016). And while we tend to solely quantify this kind of violence in terms of number of deaths and injuries, the impact of exposure to gun violence in our schools, homes, and communities results in many other unforeseen economic, social, and community costs (Irvin-Erickson, Bai, Gurvis, & Mohr, 2016). Additionally, the existing but scattered surveillance efforts to collect data on unintentional gun injuries and deaths, as well as on gun possession by youth (CDC, 2016a; CDC, 2016b; CDC, 2016c) have been insufficient for informing meaningful and effective gun violence prevention programs and policies. Research on firearm violence in the U.S. comprises less than 0.085% of the CDC budget (Rubin, 2016) and less than 0.005% of the NIH's annual budget (Rubin, 2016; NIH, 2016).

### GUNS IN K-12 SCHOOLS

One of the many understudied areas of gun violence involves the implications of firearms inside and surrounding K-12 schools. From 2013 to October 2nd, 2017, there were 128 school shootings within the K-12 school environment, defined as "any instance in which a firearm is discharged inside a school building or on a school campus, as documented by the press, and confirmed through follow-up inquiries with law enforcement" (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2017; Everytown for Gun Safety, 2016; Kalesan, Lagast, Villarreal, Pino, Fagan, & Galea 2016). While this represents just a small fraction of the incidents of gun violence Americans are exposed to, even one instance of gunfire in a school should be considered one too many. It is worth noting that exposure to gun violence occurs across a spectrum: hearing gunshots, witnessing gunfire, and of course being directly injured by a firearm, which all have implications for a child's health, development, and well-being (Luthar & Goldstein, 2004; Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Vorrasi, 2002). Work by Bieler and La Vigne (2014) on exposure to gunfire in the vicinity of schools in Washington, D.C. confirmed that just the existence of gunfire in and around schools can adversely impact youth wellbeing. This work also confirmed the findings of others who have spoken to the cyclical nature of exposure to violence and subsequent engagement in violence among youth (Bingenheimer, Brennan, & Earls, 2005). Indeed, the anticipation of gun violence is equally concerning. Research has demonstrated that the anticipation of violence more generally can lead to heightened anxiety, fear, depression, and trauma across a range of populations (Benjet, Bromet, et al., 2017; Jackson, James, Owens, & Bryan, 2017; Pryor & Hughes, 2013). Though no current research has examined this phenomenon in the context of anticipating gun violence specifically in K-12 school environments, we posit that the anticipation of gun violence in schools by youth may likely have a similar effect, particularly given the sensationalized and speculative nature of many mass school shootings that have more recently added to a perceived lack of safety in school settings among students and school staff (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). Reframing our definition of gun violence to therefore embrace a true prevention framework (Frieden, 2010) involves acknowledging that exposure to gun violence occurs in multiple forms and with varying levels of intensity.

### THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

While the rate of violent deaths on school property remains relatively low (less than 3% of all youth homicides occur at school) (NCIPC, 2014), there are many serious implications of exposure to gun violence across the spectrum on youth health and learning outcomes, as also noted above (Basch, 2011; Ander, Cook, Ludwig, & Pollack, 2009; Cook & Laub, 2002). Understanding the complex relationship between the school environment and violence is especially vital given that middle and high school aged-youth, for example, on average spend nearly half of their waking hours in their school environment (Allard, 2008). Therefore, the role of the school environment in both enabling and reducing rates of gun violence is of particular importance. Research has increasingly demonstrated the role of a positive school climate on impacting students' health, ability to engage positively with their peers, and their learning processes (Thapa, 2013). Research has also elucidated that existing responses to the anticipation of school shootings have little or no evidence base, and effective solutions to address hypothesized antecedents of gun violence have yet to be implemented and carefully evaluated. Little is understood about which behavioral risk factors predict school-based gun violence among youth (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010).

### REPOSITIONING SCHOOLS

Whereas previous discourse has argued for a singular focus on "community violence" as somehow separate from a school focus, we embrace the research that violence is not geographically isolated to schools or communities (Lane, Rubinstein, Bergen-Cico, Jennings-Bey, Fish, et al., 2017), and in fact, as firearms travel back and forth between places, so too does the threat and experience of gun-related violence. Our focus on K-12 schools, therefore, is a strategic move to reposition schools as sites that need to be protected by advocating for firearm policies known to help effectively limit youth access to weapons (Webster & Wintemute, 2015; Santaella-Tenorio, Cerda, Villaveces, & Galea, 2016), as well as sites from which agency against gun violence can be curricularly and

pedagogically cultivated, strengthening school communities. Zero tolerance policies in schools gained popularity in the mid-1990s following the passing of the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994 and grew in prominence following the Columbine tragedy. However, work by the American Psychological Association confirmed that such policies likely negatively impact the wellbeing of students without any corresponding and notable improvement in the safety of the school environment (2008). More recent work confirmed that zero tolerance efforts do not effectively get to the heart of the problem and cause more disruption and harm to students and schools than good (Teske, 2011; Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). Indeed, punitive approaches only provide temporary response to what are often deep-seated reasons for how and why guns and forms of gun violence enter school grounds.

#### RESPONSIBILITY OF THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY

The education community has a clear responsibility to address guns, gun violence, and the anticipation of gun violence in K-12 schools and in the communities surrounding these schools, and to do so without further contributing to the criminalization of children, youth, and communities they serve. Numerous physicians, psychologists, health policy experts, and injury prevention researchers have called for more data and resources to directly address our nation's gun violence crisis, and their work has been critical in bringing these issues to the forefront (Webster, Cerda, Wintemute, & Cook, 2016; Winker, Abbasi, & Rivara, 2016). Further and because of enormous organizational efforts by many, including mayors, mothers, gun violence survivors, and regular citizens (*Americans for Responsible Solutions; Brady Campaign; Coalition to Stop Gun Violence; Everytown for Gun Safety/Moms Demand Action; Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence*), there have been broad, community-wide calls for action to support gun violence prevention laws at both the state and federal level. Given the presence of guns, gun violence, and perceived threat of gun violence in our K-12 schools, however, it is imperative that these collective calls for action be loudly echoed and subsequently renewed by the education community. Keeping guns out of schools, reducing gun violence there, and addressing the perceived threat of gun violence must be considered an educational priority. This is in line with the goals of AERA (2012), the NEA (2015), and others who have in recent years emphasized the need for the more effective prevention of firearm violence in the school environment. To do so, however, requires a clear operationalizing of gun violence, comprehensive research efforts addressing the behavioral antecedents leading to gun possession and use in schools, data collection efforts that allow us to better understand the circumstances under which youth are obtaining access to guns, and efforts to understand which programmatic and curricular efforts are successfully engaging those subgroups at particular risk for gun violence. Effectively reducing guns, gun violence, and the perceived threat of gun violence in schools also requires significant federal investments in education research and practice efforts by the NIH, CDC, as well as Departments of Education, the Institute of Education Sciences, and other organizations currently providing the majority of funding for education-oriented research initiatives, as well as collective and persistent advocacy informed by good evidence.

#### CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need for coordinated efforts by the education community to effectively address the implications of firearms inside and surrounding K-12 schools. Schools should be, without question, safe spaces for learning and growth; havens where youth are nurtured and their potential cultivated. Critical health and educational challenges currently facing our nation's youth cannot be addressed in meaningful ways if they also feel unsafe or threatened. Firearms have no place within our educational system. Keeping guns out of schools and reducing gun violence in them must become a national and educational priority.

#### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Ted Alcorn, former Director of Research and Innovation at Everytown for Gun Safety ([www.everytownresearch.org](http://www.everytownresearch.org)) for his invaluable support and thoughtful insights as we conceptualized and edited this piece.

#### References

- Allard, M. (2008). How high school students use time: a visual essay. *Monthly Labor Review*, 11, 51-58. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2008/11/art4full.pdf>
- American Educational Research Association (20 December, 2012). American Educational Research Association Joins in the Call for More Effective Prevention of Violence. Retrieved from: <http://www.aera.net/Newsroom/News-Releases-and-Statements/Call-for-More-Effective-Prevention-of-Violence>.
- American Psychological Association. (2008). Are zero tolerance policies effective in schools?: An evidentiary review and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 63(9), 852-862.
- Ander, R., Cook, P.J., Ludwig, J., & Pollack, H. (2009). Gun violence among school-age youth in Chicago. *University of Chicago: Crime Lab*, Retrieved from: <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/gun-violence-among-school-age-youth-in-chicago.html>
- Basch, C.E. (2011). Aggression and violence and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. *Journal of School Health*, 81(10), 619-625.
- Benjet, C., Bromet, E., Karam, E.G., Kessler, R.C., McLaughlin, K.A., Ruscio, A.M., et al. (2016). The epidemiology of traumatic event exposure worldwide: Results from the World Mental Health Survey Consortium. *Psychological Medicine*, 46(2), 327-343.
- Bieler, S., & La Vigne, N. (2014). Close-range gunfire around DC schools. *Urban Institute*. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED559323>

- Bingenheimer, J.B., Brennan, R.T., & Earls, F.J. (2005). Firearm violence exposure and serious violent behavior. *Science*, 308(5726), 1323-1326.
- Borum, R., Cornell, D.G., Modzeleski, W., & Jimerson, S.R. (2010). What can be done about school shootings?: A review of the evidence. *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 27-37.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016a). Web-Based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System: National Violent Death Reporting System. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/nvdrs.html>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016b). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016c): National Vital Statistics System. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/>
- Consolidated Appropriations Act (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ113/PLAW-114publ113.pdf>
- Cook, P.J., & Laub, J.H. (2002). After the epidemic: Recent trends in youth violence in the United States. *Crime and Justice*, 29, 1-37.
- Everytown for Gun Safety. (2016). Analysis of school shootings: January 1, 2013 - December 31, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://everytownresearch.org/reports/analysis-of-school-shootings/>.
- Everytown for Gun Safety. (2017). School Shootings in America since 2013. Retrieved from: <http://everytownresearch.org/school-shootings/>.
- Frieden, T.R. (2010). A framework for public health action: The Health Impact Pyramid. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(4), 590-595.
- Garbarino, J., Bradshaw, C.P., & Vorrasi, J.A. (2002). Mitigating the effects of gun violence on children and youth. *The Future of Children*, 12(2), 72-85.
- Grinshteyn, E., & Hemenway, D. (2016). Violent death rates: The US compared with other high-income OECD countries, 2010. *The American Journal of Medicine*, 129(3), 266-273.
- Irvin-Erickson, Y., Bai, B., Gurvis, A., & Mohr, E. (2016). The effect of gun violence on local economies. *Urban Institute*. Full report retrieved from: <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/effect-gun-violence-local-economies>
- Jackson, F.M., James, S.A., Owens, T.C., & Bryan, A.F. (2017). Anticipated negative police-youth encounters and depressive symptoms among pregnant African American women: A brief report. *Journal of Urban Health*, 94(2), 259-265.
- Kalesan, B., Lagast, K., Villarreal, M., Pino, E., Fagan, J., & Gaela, S. (2016). School shootings during 2013-2015 in the USA. *Injury Prevention*, 23(5), 321-327.
- Lane, S.D., Rubinstein, R.A., Bergen-Cico, D., Jennings-Bey, T., Fish, L.S., Larsen, D.A., Fullilove, M.T., et al. (2017). Neighborhood trauma due to violence: A multilevel analysis. *Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved*, 28(1), 446-462.
- Luthar, S.S., & Goldstein, A. (2004). Children's exposure to community violence: Implications for understanding risk and resilience. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 33(3), 499-505.
- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2014). *Understanding School Violence*, Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/school\\_violence\\_fact\\_sheet-a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/school_violence_fact_sheet-a.pdf)
- National Education Association. (2015). *Three keys to school safety and gun violence prevention*. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/54092.htm>
- NIH Research Portfolio Online Reporting Tools. (2016). Retrieved from <https://report.nih.gov>
- Pryor, D.W., & Hughes, M.R. (2013). Fear of rape among college women: A social psychological analysis. *Violence and Victims*, 28(3), 443-465.
- Rubin, R. (2016). Tale of 2 agencies: CDC avoids gun violence research but NIH funds it. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 315(16), 1689-1691.
- Santaella-Tenorio, J., Cerda, M., Villaveces, A., & Galea, S. (2016). What do we know about the association between firearm legislation and firearm-related injuries? *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 38(1), 140-157.
- Teske, S.C. (2011). A study of zero tolerance policies in schools: A multi-integrated systems approach to improve outcomes for adolescents. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 24(2), 88-97.

Thapa, A. (2013). School climate research In Dary, T. & Pickeral, T. (Eds.) (2013). *School Climate Practices for Implementation and Sustainability*. A School Climate Practice Brief, Number 1, New York, NY: National School Climate Center.

Webster, D.W. (2015). Commentary: Evidence to guide gun violence prevention in America. *Annual Review of Public Health, 36*, 1-4.

Webster, D.W., Cerda, M., Wintemute, G.J., & Cook, P.J. (2016). Epidemiologic evidence to guide the understanding and prevention of gun violence. *Epidemiologic Reviews, 38*(1), 1-4.

Winker, M.A., Abbasi, K., & Rivara, F.P. (2016). Unsafe and understudied: The US gun problem: Overturn the funding freeze so we can restart a research effort barred by Congress in 1997. *British Medical Journal, 352*, Retrieved from <https://iiths.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/unsafe-and-understudied-the-us-gun-problem-overturn-the-funding-f>

**Cite This Article as:** *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: October 05, 2017  
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 22187, Date Accessed: 10/10/2017 4:43:14 PM

[Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review](#)