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Abstract

The peer-reviewed scientific literature does not support the idea that arming teachers will prevent school shootings. In this commentary, I draw on the criminal justice, injury prevention, and firearm safety literature to demonstrate how arming teachers will do more harm than good.

Keywords

gun violence, homicide, school safety

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A Public Health Argument against Arming Teachers

David I Swedler, PhD MPH*

Abstract

Arming teachers to protect students is an idea rejected by groups representing those who know the most about student safety: teachers (Strauss, 2012), pediatricians (Nance, Krummel, & Oldham, 2013), and law enforcement personnel (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2018). It is, however, supported by the National Rifle Association (NRA) (Sperry, 2013), and thus must be taken seriously due to the NRA's outsized political influence. Using a scientific approach to firearm safety, and expertise from multiple professions, it is clear why this proposition will actually result in more shooting deaths.

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Supporters of arming teachers would claim that placing more armed personnel in schools will deter shooters because the school is now a "hard target." If teachers could carry firearms, the idea goes, a potential shooter would now perceive it as harder to target such a location where armed individuals exist. However, the idea that more guns in a location results in decreased crime via deterrence has been refuted in a report by the National Academies (Wellford, Pepper, & Petrie, 2005). Any previously identified inverse relationships between firearms and crime were found by the National Academies to lose significance once increased time periods were examined or control variables were adjusted. Lacking peer-reviewed support for this concept, we should not fall back on anecdotes to pick and choose the situations surrounding individual shootings. Citing case-by-case, tit-for-tat incidents is not the way to produce scientific debate. So, the position that a potential school shooter would be deterred by potentially-armed teachers is not supported by existing literature.

Public health expertise and research demonstrates that bringing more firearms into schools will result in more shootings. From injury epidemiology, we know that increasing the source of an injury in the environment results in increased numbers of that injury. In mass casualty events at American schools, the source of the injury is the gun. The United States has the highest homicide rates of high income nations, and this is directly linked to firearm ownership levels (Council on Injury, Violence, and Poison Prevention Executive Committee, 2012). Within the nation, homicide rates, suicide rates, and intimate partner homicides increase in states where firearm ownership is increased (Anglemyer, Horvath, & Rutherford, 2014; Santaella-Tenorio, Cerdá, Villaveces, & Galea, 2016). A firearm in the home increases the risk for homicide by three times (Kellermann et al., 1993).

If schools were to adhere to the child safety expertise of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), safe storage of a firearm would entail keeping the firearm unloaded and locked separately from the ammunition (Hagan, Shaw, & Duncan, 2017). Following the recommendation of the AAP, teachers would have to unlock a gun safe, retrieve the firearm and ammunition, then load the firearm before being able to confront a potential shooter with their firearm. But this elongated reaction time is in opposition to what supporters of arming teachers claim will happen. President Trump (Epstein & Sink, 2018), among others, touts the decreased reaction time of armed teachers – versus relying on the arrival of law enforcement – as a reason

why teachers should be armed. If a teacher is unable to access a firearm at a moment's notice and immediately confront a shooter, the idea of deterrence further falls apart. This delay in reaction time raises the alternative that teachers should carry firearms on their person or store them in their desks.

This alternative is actually far worse and could result in even more shootings. According to Crime Opportunity theory from the criminal justice literature (Cohen & Felson, 1979), also known as Routine Activity theory, all a potential offender needs to commit a crime is motivation and a sufficient window of opportunity. Bringing a firearm into the classroom will open wide the window for students and school personnel to commit fatal violence. If students know that a firearm is held in a given classroom, or by certain teachers, will the student try to obtain that weapon? We know that adolescents who have access to a firearm in the home are more likely to die by suicide than those who do not have access to one in the home (Anglemyer et al., 2014). Since fatal firearm suicides are such an impulsive act (Simon et al., 2001), a student or faculty member exhibiting suicidal thoughts may attempt a rash and desperate act to obtain a teacher's firearm to attempt self-harm.

Further, if a student wants to threaten or commit violence on a teacher or other student, would that student seek to access the known firearm? This would make the armed teacher a target for assault and robbery. Further, if a teacher is armed, carrying a firearm doesn't necessarily even protect that teacher: a case-control study conducted in an emergency department found that individuals carrying firearms are at 4-times greater risk of being shot than those who were assaulted but not in possession of a firearm (Branas, Richmond, Culhane, Ten Have, & Wiebe, 2009).

Finally, if the armed teacher were to lose possession of the firearm to an assailant, this poses an immediate danger to him/her and anyone else present on campus. Being killed in a take-away homicide like this is a problem even for those trained in firearms safety and defensive tactics: approximately 10% of all firearm homicides of American law enforcement officers are committed using their own service weapon when an assailant is able to take it away from the officer and use it to complete the homicide (Weiss, 1996). And the officers who are killed with their own weapon were found to be in above average physical condition, making it unlikely that teachers — who do not have any self-defense, physical fitness, or defensive tactics training requirements — would be more successfully able to fend off assailants.

All the peer-reviewed literature on firearm violence tells us that the risk for intentional and unintentional school shooting would increase if teachers were armed. However, we cannot overlook a major implication of arming teachers: we would be imbuing teachers with the police power of the state to take lives when they deem it necessary. We would be asking teachers to potentially shoot and kill their own students to prevent crimes that currently are not being stopped by modern police forces and tactics. This is not the job of teachers and teachers have indicated that they do not want to be put in a position to make this judgment (Sperry, 2013). Public health professionals must add our voices and evidence to oppose ideas that increase the risk for firearm violence.

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