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Accidental Discharges by the Police

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By: Stephen Kaminsky

With the enactment of new laws and a national debate on whether teachers should be armed, the Center for Homicide Research examined the issue of accidental discharges by schoolteachers. Researchers found that one group of current firearm users were also experiencing accidental discharges – the police. Firearm advocates propose that teacher training should match that of police officers. Therefore, researchers hypothesized that cases of accidental discharges by teachers might be just as prevalent as, or possibly higher than, those of police. This observation highlights a possible threat to the safety of students, school administrators, and faculty.

Background

Due to recent events, such as the tragic elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, some states have proposed arming schoolteachers with firearms. South Dakota became the first state to pass a law explicitly allowing school employees to carry firearms on the job, under House Bill 108. This bill was signed into law by Governor Dennis Daugaard on Friday, March 8, 2013. Many other states already have provisions in their laws – or no legal restrictions – that allow teachers to possess firearms in the classroom. In fact, in numerous school districts nationwide, teachers actually carry firearms (Eligon, 2013, 1).

In Utah, teachers and others with concealed carry licenses have been allowed to possess firearms in public schools for many years. A few school districts in Texas have been given written authorization by their superintendent to allow teachers to carry firearms in their schools. Legislatures in other states, such as Georgia, New Hampshire, and Kansas are working on measures similar to South Dakota's. So far, South Dakota is the only state with a statute that specifically authorizes teachers to carry a firearm (Fox News, 2013, 1).

The South Dakota law gives the school district discretion in allowing teachers to be armed. A key concept in arming school personnel is the use of a guardsperson, or “sentinel.” The law explicitly states, “School districts may allow a school employee, a hired security officer or a volunteer to serve as a sentinel who can carry a firearm in the school” (Eligon, 2013, 1). However, the school district must receive permission from its local law enforcement agency before carrying out the program. As the South Dakota law explains, “The law requires the sentinels to undergo training similar to what law enforcement officers receive” (Eligon, 2013, 1). The overall objective of the bill is to protect school safety.

Although many people are challenging the idea of arming schoolteachers, some groups, like the National Rifle Association (NRA), are advocating adoption of these new laws. A 12-person task-force called the School Shield Program, led by former NRA representative Asa Hutchinson, released

a 225-page report¹ advocating arming teachers. This task force recommended that schools designate willing staff to be armed and trained, proposing a model training program consisting of 40-60 hours of firearms training (Wilkie, 2013, 1). Hutchinson continues to encourage the NRA to fund pilot programs to train school employees to carry weapons. Supporters of introducing guns into schools claim that no accidents have occurred in states where school teachers are armed (Eligon, 2013).

The notion of arming schoolteachers has not gone unchallenged; the main concern is the safety of teachers and students. Kenneth S. Trump, President of the National School Safety and Security Services, a security service organization, has talked with school districts across the nation regarding this debate. Trump found that many school board members, teachers, and others associated with the school consistently opposed the idea of arming schoolteachers. Trump also noted that police officers train their entire career to have a “life-safety mindset²” or “combat mindset” (National School Safety and Security Services, 2013; Talbott, n.d., 1). Officers continually monitor and scan for dangers in a proactive way. Most educators do not have this same mindset and therefore would be reactive and lacking in an ability to respond appropriately.

Despite all of the training police officers have and the awareness and possession of this “life-safety mindset,” police officers do experience accidental discharges of their weapons. Accidental discharges are defined as “those in which the officer did not mean to pull the trigger” (Geller & Karales, 1981, 1832). In situations where no firearm is present, police officers are warned that they are introducing a weapon into a situation that ultimately could be used against them if the firearm were taken during a struggle (Little, 1984; see also: Associated Press, 2013).

A fundamental issue is how to adequately ensure the safety of teachers and students. Regardless of the problem at hand, analysis should be grounded in empirical data. To date, there is no accidental discharge data available regarding school teachers. This report documents the creation of a useful comparison for schoolteachers by using detailed accounts of accidental discharges of firearms by law-enforcement officers.

Methodology

To create this comparison, secondary data was collected through an effective process called open-source data collection (Nguyen, 2006; Eisler, 2008; Chermak et al., 2011). Google and *Police Magazine* were used to compile this database. Discriminating search terms included, but were not limited to, “accidental shooting police officer,” “accidental discharge by police,” “gun cleaning discharge police officer,” “accidental discharge,” “and police officer accidental shooting.” Neutral search terms were carefully selected in an attempt to reduce biased results. Cases were identified and retained until a saturation point was reached. Saturation means new cases appeared repeatedly with no new result (Robson, 1993, 2002).

Case selection criteria were established to clearly define the term “accidental discharge” (also known as *unintentional*³ or at times *negligent*⁴ discharge) and to exclude any case that did not qualify. Cases had to be discharges by a licensed and trained police officer who did not intend to discharge his or her weapon. To obtain this nationwide sample, the discharge must have occurred in the United States after January 1, 1990.

After cases were identified, the database was analyzed to determine if licensed police officers commonly experienced accidental discharges. While this does not determine prevalence, it does highlight that these shootings do in fact occur despite an advanced level of training. The researchers conducted in-depth analysis of the data, searching for trends and patterns. In the research process there were 11 variables collected, including: victim’s name, incident year,

¹ To see the full report, go to: http://www.nrschoolshield.com/NSS_Final_FULL.pdf.

² Geller & Karales, 1981, page 1832

³ NYPD. (2011). New York City Police Department Firearms Discharge Report 2010. City of New York, page viii.

⁴ Fairburn, R. (2007, September 18). Causes and cures for the negligent discharge. PoliceOne.com. Retrieved: <http://www.policeone.com/police-products/firearms/articles/1354124-Causes-and-cures-for-the-negligent-discharge/>.

city, state, agency, narrative, data source, discharger name, whether the discharge resulted in death, whether the discharge was during training or during active duty, and the community type. For community type, four categories were used: major urban (greater than 250,000 people), urban (less than 100,000 people), suburban (10,000 to 99,999 people), and rural (less than 10,000 people). Researchers created a coding sheet for these 11 variables specifically outlining what each variable represents and then classified each case accordingly.

Results

The resulting dataset consists of 80 total cases of accidental discharges. In 56.3% (45) of cases the discharger names were unidentified whereas in 38.8% (31) of cases the victim's name was not identified in the media reports. When agencies report, they often remove the dischargers' name. This practice may avoid embarrassment but makes it difficult to accurately and independently assess certain kinds of information. Although researchers continually discovered cases of accidental discharge by police, it is not completely clear just exactly how many incidents occurred. Some police officers are reportedly reluctant to provide information about accidental discharges (City of Seattle, 2007).

Analyzing geographical regions, the sample's distribution was not entirely normal. The cases are overrepresented in larger cities, which may be an artifact of the sources used. Surprisingly, 36.3% (29) of the incidents occurred in *major* urban areas, 33.8% (27) occurred in suburban areas, 17.5% (14) occurred in urban areas, and only 12.5% (10) occurred in rural areas. In other words, over half, 53.8% (43) of the total cases occurred in urban cities. Reporting requirements in rural versus urban communities may help to account for this difference. Additionally, the presence of witnesses or coworkers in an urban area may help ensure that a report is filed.

Concerning the severity of impact, 56.3% (45) of the incidents resulted in injury without death, 26.3% (21) resulted in no injury at all, and 17.5% (14) resulted in death. It is highly likely that the increased severity of cases is related to the propensity of news media to cover more severe cases. Concerning the circumstances under which the accidental discharge occurred, 20% (16) occurred during a training exercise and 7.5% (6) occurred during weapon cleaning.

Recommendations

Because of the high incidence of accidental discharges, there should be a concrete description of what the training for schoolteachers would entail. The recent South Dakota bill is lacking in detail, stating "the law requires the sentinels to undergo training similar to what law enforcement officers receive" (Eligon, 2013, 1). Proposals to train sentinels should include: 1) who is involved in the training, 2) the type of training, and 3) the safety protocols in place to protect participants.

Policies should specify the types of weapons to be carried in the schools and used in training. For example, the bill should specify that the firearms used in schools do not have short triggers or easy-to-modify safeties. Many of the firearms in CHR's accidental discharge database lack long triggers and/or only have one safety.

The proposal should also include language about cleaning processes that would be involved in arming schoolteachers. To work properly, firearms should be thoroughly and regularly cleaned and oiled (NRA, 2012; The Nation's Law Enforcement Community, 2013). While the researchers included "cleaning" as a search term, the prevalence of accidental discharges that occurred during cleaning was higher than expected. Policy should therefore specify the place and process for routine cleaning of firearms that would provide the minimum of exposure to students.

Conclusion

Not all plans are created equally. If a legislative body did decide that the best course of action was to arm teachers, there are certain factors that make a deadly weapon even more dangerous. Without thorough descriptions and concrete plans, accidental discharges pose a grave concern. This is especially true if schoolteachers have much less experience with weapons than professionally trained police officers and because they lack a life-safety mindset.

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Stephen Kaminsky is a research assistant at the Center for Homicide Research and a Sociology: Law Crime and Deviance student at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. He can be reached at: kami0119@umn.edu.



CENTER for HOMICIDE RESEARCH

3036 University Avenue SE #E

Minneapolis, MN 55414

(612) 331-4820

www.homicidecenter.org