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Teachers with Guns: Firearms Discharges by Schoolteachers, 1980 - 2012

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Introduction

On December 14, 2012, 20 children and six adults were shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Since this shooting, there has been considerable policy discussion about how to help prevent school and other types of mass shootings. The National Rifle Association (NRA) has suggested that a possible solution to school shootings is to allow teachers to carry weapons on school grounds as a means of protecting themselves and others (Castillo, 2012). The idea of arming schoolteachers has received substantial media attention because of the number of fatalities and the ages of the young victims at Sandy Hook.

This paper describes the current conditions and social landscape prior to the widespread implementation of a public policy intervention of arming schoolteachers with firearms. Ten states have introduced legislation to allow weapons on school property. Currently, 18 states already allow guns to be carried on school grounds but not without constraints (Huffington Post: Education, 2013). Many states allow firearms only on school grounds for ceremonies, certain mechanical demonstrations, or if the gun carrier is a security guard at the school. Most states also require the gun carrier to receive advance permission from the districts' superintendents or trustees. For example, in New York State, written permission from the school is required in order to carry a firearm on school grounds (Johnson, 2013).

Two types of shootings are considered in this report: licit and illicit. Self-defense is an example of a licit or socially allowed use of a firearm. Accidents and negligent use of a firearm are considered illicit. In one case, a college professor accidentally shot himself in the leg while trying to secure his weapon before a lecture (Crowley & Venezia, 2011). Another illicit type might include a case where one teacher targets another teacher.

Carrying firearms in classrooms is not an entirely new proposal, but its origin is grounded in a unique situation. Harrold, Texas teachers have been allowed to carry concealed weapons since 2008 because of the rural school's distance from police (Huffington Post: Education, 2013; "Harrold, Texas," 2012). Though no discharges of firearms have occurred there (Huffington Post: Education, 2013), Harrold now has a five-year history that can be examined. However, not all of the employees chose to carry, and this is a very small district with only 103 students (Wakeman, 2012, 1). Arming teachers, therefore, is an important topic to examine before the trend has time to develop widespread implementation and consequences (Huffington Post: Education, 2013).

Police officers, both on-duty and off-duty, occasionally shoot and kill active shooters they respond to in the course of duty (Robles & Lee, 2012). Thus, a legitimate basis exists for the belief that armed guards might stop or limit the death toll from a mass shooter. Yet teachers are a different kind of authority figure than law enforcement. They do not have a “life-safety mindset” cultivated by police experience; conversely, officers are not familiar with the unique relationships that exist between teachers and students (National School Safety and Security Services, 2013.)

Since arming teachers is a new policy intervention, limited research exists on teachers carrying guns to inform the discussion. There is extensive media coverage of the topic but little empirical analysis of aggregate events. This report will discuss firearm use by teachers, identifying the primary motives, where the shootings occur, whether the teacher dies by suicide or accident, and various incident demographics including victim and offender. Furthermore, it will explore the effect of guns on the classroom environment.

Literature

Some arguments for arming teachers are anchored in the errant belief that school shootings are on the rise. However, existing statistics specific to school shootings are limited. In terms of general school violence, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) report that “school associated violent deaths are rare” (2) and that less than two percent of all youth homicides occur at school. This percentage has endured through the last 10 years. University of New Hampshire Crimes Against Children Research Center director David Finklehor estimates the chances of a student being killed or even harmed while at school at less than one in a million (Lawrence, 2012).

It is quite clear that mass shootings have not been on the rise in the last few years either; this more general category has been studied in greater detail. According to criminologist Grant Duwe (2005), the number of mass shootings *has been decreasing* over the last thirty years. There have been about 20 mass shootings each year since 1976 (Fox, 2013), while the United States population has increased from approximately 218 million in 1976 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) to 314 million in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Therefore, the rate is also decreasing, albeit slightly. Though the attacks in 2012 were particularly deplorable, they were not significantly elevated compared to any year since 1980. (Pearce, 2012). Fox (2012) refers to the attention paid to shooting events like those in the summer of 2012, which many interpreted as a rise in mass murder, as actually “nothing more than random timing and sheer coincidence” (1).

A significant shortcoming in mass murder research lies in the way in which data samples are constructed. Some publications cite a rising trend in shootings for the year 2012; however, these publications only include specific cases. In particular, they only include what they call public and random shootings and exclude any other types of shootings including familicides, which account for roughly half of all mass murders. For example, Follman, Arenson, & Pan (2012), published in *Mother Jones* (a political magazine), initially excluded cases from their sample that occurred in more than one location, had more than one shooter, and did not have at least four victims killed (which is the standard criteria for mass murder). These authors further stated that they did not apply these criteria to several of the cases. Despite poor case selection by research journalists and subsequent revisions, various websites still reference these results in arguments for allowing teachers to carry guns (Fox, 2013; Follman, Arenson, & Pan, 2012).

Though rates of mass shootings have not increased (Duwe, 2005), these killings still emerge as a major policy issue reported by mainstream media outlets. This attention stems from a strong narrative of school bullying, which developed and was added to the discussions since the April 1999 shooting at Columbine High School (Kim, Koh, & Leventhal, 2005). Bullying, including bullying by teachers, is well documented (Twemlow, & Fonagy, 2005), and many school shooters have been described as having been bullied at school (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Vossekuil, 2002).

Teachers have been arrested for murders, but more commonly are involved in threatening their own students (Johnson, 2012; Associated Press, 2004). In one case, a teacher threatened to “shoot up” her school (Nickerson, 2013, 1). Another teacher told misbehaving students he would “line them up against a wall and shoot them” (Thompson, 2007, 1). Advocates of arming teachers claim that it will reduce fatalities in school shootings, but given threats made by teachers, introducing firearms could actually escalate what might remain low-level incidents.

Although teachers might never act upon threats they make, schools have adopted policies with language like “zero-tolerance” to mandate serious disciplinary consequences for students that exhibit the same behavior. These schools, often spurred by the fear of school shootings, intend to send a message to students and the public. For instance, any kind of threat in some school districts is grounds for automatic expulsion (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). These rules do not take specific or unique circumstances into consideration (Levick, 2000). Disciplinary action for threats has also been backed by the courts. In *Lavine v. Blaine School District* (2001), the Ninth Circuit Court upheld the emergency expulsion of a high school student who gave his English teacher a poem he wrote from the perspective of a student who killed his classmates.

Members of the police have voiced their reservations about arming teachers. Texas police brought up the potential for teachers to leave a gun where a student could retrieve and use it. They are further concerned that if every teacher had a gun, there would be an unnecessarily large number of guns in schools (even including elementary schools). This large number of guns could lead to accidental shootings, especially those involving younger children who do not understand what guns do. Texas police also warn that if a school shooting occurs, teachers or first response officers might accidentally shoot one another if they both had guns (Pinkerton, 2013).

Many administrators are not supportive of this measure either. In Missouri (where a teacher arming bill has been proposed), there are several superintendents who oppose arming teachers. To these administrators, the idea seems to be a knee-jerk reaction to the Sandy Hook shooting, and they are concerned about the effects of responding to that incident out of fear. Their position is not only that arming teachers won't stop the violence, but that it would also exacerbate it, thereby increasing the number of shooting incidents. Superintendents expressed uncertainty about the effectiveness of adding more guns to the equation. (Jenkins, 2013).

Teachers are already allowed to carry concealed weapons in Utah, but even they are not sure about this idea. One teacher stated that although she is pro-gun, she does not feel as though she could maintain gun safety on school grounds (Reuters, 2012). Teachers expressed the fear that bigger students could overpower them, take the weapon, and then use it against the teacher or other students (Zuckerman, 2012).

Another potential problem with guns in schools is what is termed the *weapons effect*, the phenomenon in which simply being in the presence of a weapon can increase feelings of aggression. In Berkowitz & LaPage's (1967) examination of this effect, students who were in the presence of a gun reported higher levels of aggressive feelings towards other students and gave more violent evaluations of other students' performance on a simple task in the form of electric shocks. This finding points to possible negative outcomes for students exposed to guns in the classroom (Simons & Turner, 1974; Turner & Simons, 1976).

Programs have been designed to train teachers before they begin carrying concealed weapons in schools, tapping into the booming business of firearms training. Some schools are contracting with companies to provide the courses, which can cost over \$1,200 per teacher (Associated Press, 2013). And yet,

gun lobbyists in other states are backing these programs (Reuters, 2012). At the state legislature level, a teacher firearms training bill was proposed with an initial estimated cost of over \$9 million, which was eventually lowered to \$1 million (Weissert, 2013).

An even more troublesome aspect of these programs is the lack of a standard curriculum. In Utah, 200 teachers recently completed a standard concealed weapon firearms training course. It was not specifically tailored for school settings (Reuters, 2012). The National Institute of Justice's Task Force on Private Security set a standard in 1976 of "24 hours of firearms training, including 3 hours' instruction on legal and policy restraints" for private security employees (Cunningham, Strauchs, & Van Meter, 1991, 4). Presently, some classes consist of only a few hours of training (Associated Press, 2013) and are no different than a standard conceal & carry class the public might take. Courses also have substituted plastic guns in a conference room for realistic training with live ammunition (Grossman & Toppo, 2012).

Pervasive instances of accidental discharges among trained individuals highlight the potential for firearm accidents in the classroom (Kaminsky, 2013). In one such instance, a firearms training instructor accidentally shot one of his students in the foot ("Gun instructor," 2010). Furthermore, at events part of a "Gun Appreciation Day" promotion in 2013, five people were accidentally shot in the presence of several gun experts (Khouri, 2013). Given that the average elementary class size for American public schools in 2007-2008 was 20.0, the number of individuals in the vicinity of a firearm without firearms training--or perhaps even basic firearm safety knowledge--would be far higher in the classroom than at the gun events where accidents still occurred (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008).

Procedural errors can also put students at risk. On several occasions, school security officers have forgotten their firearms in school restrooms. Although no one was harmed in incidents in Lapeer, MI, Chicago, IL, and Nash County, NC, administrators admitted that the mistakes could have had tragic consequences (Ramacha, 2013, Dardick, 2000, "School resource officer," 2000; Pinkerton, 2013). This is not to say that armed security guards or police officers should not be allowed in schools but instead to point out that arming teachers would increase the number of guns in the school and ultimately, the mounting danger. These cases demonstrate that mundane but hazardous errors are a realistic possibility, even for those expressly hired for school security and trained to carry weapons.

Since the issue of arming teachers is a relatively new topic, it has received little empirical study. Therefore, most of the literature does not come from peer reviewed sources but rather published news reports. In addition, most of these reports are not objective and clearly appear to support a specific side of the debate. In one academic article, however, Kopel (2009, 536) argues in favor of arming schoolteachers. His research, based on case examples, "found no evidence that the gun-carriers have harmed or threatened anyone (other than terrorists or man-eating bears)."

Given the potential for lethal outcomes of a policy intervention of arming schoolteachers with guns, it is crucial to determine the safety of such a proposition. A baseline of irresponsible discharges of a firearm by these teachers would therefore be useful to establish any increase of shootings following implementation of such a policy. It would also be useful to demonstrate the types of incidents one might expect if the policy intervention is enacted.

Methodology

This analysis focuses on U.S. teachers who have irresponsibly discharged a firearm, either on or off school grounds. For the purposes of this study, irresponsible use of a firearm (Hemenway, 2001) is defined as accidental shooting and intentional shooting that is not clearly self-defense.

The 30 cases in the dataset were not necessarily school-related, but they all involve teachers as offenders. Cases that occurred before 1980 were excluded due to the unavailability of consistent electronic data before this date.

Reports of these incidents were obtained using a process called open-source data collection (Eisler, 2008; Ho et al., 2009; Anokwa, Hartung, Brunette, & Borriello, 2009; Chermak, Freilich, Parkin, & Lynch, 2012). A newer research method, this strategy culls incidents from wherever the data is available. While Miethe & Regoeczi (2004) harshly critique the use of media reports, Earl (2004, 65) explains that coverage of “hard news...tends to be relatively accurate.” When bias is discovered, it tends to be structured in a consistent and therefore predictable manner. Earl addresses criticisms of selection bias, pointing out that newspaper data “compare favorably” to a nonresponse bias in surveys (77).

Comparisons between data-sources have also demonstrated that depending on the variables being collected, news reports are sometimes preferred. In some instances, media or news reports are actually more accurate than death certificates, which are filled out mostly by funeral directors using family members as key informants. Only a portion of the certificate is certified by the medical examiner. For instance, when considering date of the decedent’s death, the CDC coding manual only requires the body-found date as an acceptable entry (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003, 59). Every homicide data-source has its shortcomings, and no data is error-free (Riedel, 1999).

News reports are excellent sources for homicide research because newspapers often engage in a “disproportionate focus on crimes of violence such as homicide,” Paulsen (2002, 114). Media reports have been used previously in homicide research, though in a limited way. For instance, Petee, Padgett & York (1997) used it for studying mass murder. They have also been used for the purpose of injury surveillance as reported in the American Journal of Public Health, noting that newspapers accounts were more or less accurate depending on the variable being studied (Rainey & Runyan, 1992).

In this present study, data collection was limited to LexisNexis, NewsBank, and Google. Search terms and phrases used to identify cases included: school, teacher, schoolteacher, gun, accident, shooting, and firearm. Cases were collected until a saturation point occurs, meaning search results become repetitious and yield no new incidents (Robson, 1993, 2002).

The following criteria were used to select cases: The shooter must be a teacher of a school or college, and his or her present or former main occupation must be teaching. The teacher must have shot a firearm with bullets (as opposed to blanks or bb’s), and he or she must not have been shooting in self-defense, which is considered licit. Finally, the cases chosen must have occurred in the United States of America after 1980.

The identified data only include cases of actual shootings; no reports identify a weapon discharge that did not result in any injuries. Teachers may have discharged their weapons without hitting anyone, but perhaps such incidents did not receive the same level of media attention as those in which a person was actually shot. Available media coverage through open-source collection may also be affected by the geographic area in which the incident occurred. Those incidents that were covered by small community newspapers or newspapers without an online component could have been excluded. Furthermore, reports of firearm mishandling outside of school grounds may not always state the profession of the offender, which could mean that some relevant incidents are not included in the data.

The demographic information analyzed for each incident in this study is year of offense, state of offense, and age of offender. The variables of interest are motive, place of shooting, if students were present, if the shooter died by suicide or shot himself or herself without dying, the number of victims excluding the shooter, each victim’s description up to the sixth victim (in terms of student, administrator, significant other,

etc.), whether each victim was killed in the shooting offense, and the type of school where the shooter taught.

Data

The resulting dataset is comprised of 30 cases where teachers discharged their firearms. Overall, 18 states are represented in the data and for the most part are fairly distributed across the United States. The state with the highest percentage of cases is Florida with 23.3% (7/30). Pennsylvania then has the second highest number of cases at 10% (3/30). Most of the states represented have only one case each.

Temporally, the data are spread out over a 22 year span from 1990-2012. The cases from 1990-1999 compose 37.9% (11/29) of the total cases, and the cases occurring from 2000-2009 form 34.4% (10/29) of the total cases. Lastly, 27.6% (8/29) of the cases took place after 2010. There was one case whose year was missing.

A severity assessment indicates the outcome of the incident. The teacher accidentally discharged his or her gun in only one case. In that incident, one person (a bystander) was struck and injured.

Not every shooting resulted in the wounding or death of a victim, though the remainder of cases, 96.7% (29), were intentional shootings. Although there are 30 teachers in the dataset, there are 35 total victims (excluding the shooter). Of these victims, 74.3% (26/35) died from the shooting, indicating that a majority of victims were involved in fatal interactions.

Table 1

Categories of People Victimized by Teachers with Guns

Victim Description	Frequency	Valid percent
Significant other (present or former)	11	31.4
Administrator	7	20
Other teacher	6	17.1
School staff	1	2.9
Acquaintance	3	8.6
Other family member of shooter	4	11.4
Other	3	8.6
Total	35	100

In only nine incidents (30%) there is no injury of a person other than the teacher. In 70% of cases (21), at least one other person was shot. In 50% (15) of cases only one other person was shot. When victims are shot, the minimum number of persons being shot in the incident is one, while the maximum

known victims is at least six. As might be expected, as the victim count grows, there are fewer and fewer incidents.

Teachers often, 63.3% (19), used the firearm to suicide. One other teacher, 3.3% (1), shot him or herself, though not fatally. The most common age group for teacher suicide is 41-50, with 44.4% (8/18) of the suicides. The 51-60 bracket includes 22.2% (4/18), and the 21-30 and 31-40 year olds each make up 16.7% (3/18) of the suicides.

While some teachers shot themselves, most of the teachers (70%, 21) shot at least one other person. Double and triple victim incidents are equally frequent, with 6.5% (2) in each category. Finally, the number of cases for mass shootings are four, five, and six victims is one each at 3.2%.

None of the victims in the shootings are students or parents of students. Instead, 31.4% (11/35) of victims are present or former significant others of the offender, 20% (7/35) are administrators, and 17.1% (6/35) are teachers. Only 2.8% (1/35) of victims are identified as school staff. Since a majority of victims are present or former significant others, future research should examine motive in more detail.

Frequency of incidents varies by age of the teacher who used the gun. The largest offender age group is 41-50 years, in which 44.8% (13/29) of offenders fall. The second most frequent group is 31-40 years at 24.1% (7/29), and third is 51-60 years at 17.2% (5/29). Offenders ages 21-30 compose 13.8% (4/29) of offenders. One offender age is missing. The mean offender age is 42.4 ($\sigma = 9.41$) and the median age is 44 years.

Table 2

Locations of Incidents

Location	Frequency	Valid Percent
School Grounds	9	32.3
Residence of Teacher	7	22.6
Residence of Victim	2	6.5
Motor Vehicle	3	9.7
Residence NOS	1	3.2
Public Property	1	3.2
Multiple Locations	4	12.9
Other	3	9.6
Total	30	100

Note. NOS means Not Otherwise Specified.

The highest single category of teachers (36.7%, 11) is those who are employed at the high school level, followed by elementary school level teachers at 26.7% (8). The middle school or junior high level ranks third at 16.7% (5) employed. Finally, multi-level schools (such as boarding schools), is tied for the least common employer at 10.0% (3); colleges and universities also has 10% (3).

The location of a shooting is most often on school grounds, with 30% (9) of cases occurring exclusively on school property. This percentage excludes one case that occurred in multiple locations (school grounds being one of them). The second most prevalent location is the teacher's residence at 23.3% (7). The least common locations are at residence types that are not clearly specified and on public property, with each at 3.3% (1). The school grounds shootings were then subdivided to clarify whether students were actually present at the time. Of the cases that occurred on school grounds for at least part of the offense, 44.4% (4/9) were committed with students on school grounds, while 55.6% (5/9) of such shootings were committed without students present.

A domestic problem (excluding sexual scandals with minors) is the most common motive accounting for 37.5% (9/24) of cases, and 80% (12/15) of domestic victims (significant other(s) or family member(s) of the teacher) were shot due to domestic problems. In six cases the motive was missing.

The next most frequent motive is a sexual scandal at 20.8% (5/24). School problems (such as a teacher leaving a job, or not receiving tenure) account for only 16.7% (4/24) of motives. Arguments with friends account for only 6.7% (2/24), which are the least likely motives.

Discussion

This analysis reveals that some time periods register an elevated number of cases. The 2010-2012 segment, although a smaller time span, contains more cases. This could signify an upward trend in teacher shootings in recent years. However, it is important to remember that news reports from online databases were the main source for this study. Newer articles are also generally easier to access than older ones, which perhaps, though not necessarily, lead to this disparity.

The most frequent age of offender/shooters is 41-50 years old. In 2003-2004, the average age of American public school teachers was 42.5 years (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2004). Thus shooters are predominantly teachers of average age. Cases of teachers as offenders cannot easily be blamed on a lack of teaching experience or as part of an outlier age group.

None of the victims of teachers with guns in this dataset are students or parents of students. Instead, the majority of victims were made up of other significant persons such as wives, ex-wives, girlfriends or unmarried partners. In this sense, a person primarily occupied as a teacher is in no way different from any other shooter. Teachers suffer from mental illnesses, commit acts of domestic violence, and make mistakes like a person from any other profession. Students, however, can be impacted by a variety of non-domestic motives. While no case in this dataset reveal it, domestics can and do spill over into the workplace, thereby putting students at risk.

Although no students were shot in the cases in this dataset, it is not difficult to envision scenarios in which a child could become caught in the crossfire. Most of the teachers (70%) shot at least one victim and the majority of victims were involved in fatal interactions. Firearms are potentially deadly weapons that could be introduced into the classroom. There is no way to control how they will be used once that happens.

School grounds are the most frequent location of shootings, and half the time, students are present during the incident. The shootings on school property with students present are clear violations of student

safety. These violations were initiated by the teacher, regardless of whether or not students were the intended target.

An overwhelming majority (96.7%) of the shootings were intentional. At the present time, few schoolteachers actually carry firearms, especially on school grounds. If legislation passes, more teachers are likely to bring a weapon to school without an intent to use the weapon maliciously. There are risks however beyond intentional violence such as accidental discharge.

If such an arming policy were to be implemented, it would be useful to look for a change in accidental shooting rates. One should be cautioned, however, that accidental discharges by teachers may go unreported. In a study of accidental discharges by police, Kaminsky (2013, 3), notes that officers are “reluctant to provide information about accidental discharge.” We might expect teachers and their schools to show a similar reticence.

Potential alternatives have been suggested to keep students safe other than arming educators. As mentioned earlier, the most viable solution could be the addition of police officers or security guards to schools. A second solution is to apply conflict resolution strategies (Orpinas & Home, 2004; Thorsen-Spano, 1996). One such instance of this is to verbally, and without a weapon, confront the gunman. In California, a teacher managed to talk a gunman out of shooting, and convinced the teen shooter to give him the gun. Although there was only one student who was injured in this particular case (Usborne, 2013), this is likely to be a highly risky proposition.

In advocating arming teachers, NRA vice president Wayne LaPierre stated, “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” (Lichtblau & Rich, 2012, 1). Our analysis of recent teacher shootings, however, indicates the problems with assigning these labels and relying on such a simplistic dichotomy. The potential for both accidental and intentional shootings in which teachers can cause lethal damage to innocent actors is apparent.

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