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Should schools have teachers carry guns?

Abstract

With 20 states having teachers and staff carrying guns to varying degrees on school property, we don't need to guess how the policy would work. Fears of teachers carrying guns in terms of accidents or other problems have not materialized. Letting teachers carry is the only effective way to overcome the strategic advantages of mass public killers. The other alternatives to preventing mass public shootings have real limits.

Keywords

mass public shootings, school safety, concealed carry

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Should Schools Have Teachers Carry Guns?

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Abstract

With 20 states having teachers and staff carrying guns to varying degrees on school property, we don't need to guess how the policy would work. Fears of teachers carrying guns in terms of accidents or other problems have not materialized. Letting teachers carry is the only effective way to overcome the strategic advantages of mass public killers. The other alternatives to preventing mass public shootings have real limits.

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One thing is clear after each mass public school shooting: neither background checks nor assault weapons bans would have prevented the attack. But within hours, before we even know how the shooter obtained his gun, there are immediate calls for stronger firearm laws.

Without letting teachers and staff arm themselves, there are real limits to securing our schools. Schools have multiple entrances to facilitate easy evacuations in case of fires or other emergencies. So having a single entrance creates its own safety hazards, and making everyone pass through a metal detector can create crowded bottlenecks of people that present easy targets to attackers. Metal detectors won't stop someone from shooting their way into a school. And as occurred at the Aurora, Colorado Batman Movie Theater shooting, exits that are designed to only open from inside the building can be propped open.

More mental health resources have their benefits, but it is very difficult for mental health professionals to identify patients who pose a serious violent threat. It's very common for mass killers to be seeing psychiatrists before their attacks who miss the risk of violence, including Ivan Lopez (the recent Fort Hood shooter), Adam Lanza (Sandy Hook elementary), James Holmes ("Batman" movie theater) and Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech) (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2014). Indeed, from January 1998 through May 2018, 65 percent of the mass public shooters were seeing mental health care professionals before their attacks, but in only one of those cases had the killer previously been identified as a danger to others (data on mass public shootings available here <https://crimeresearch.org/data/>). The question isn't whether some killers can be identified, but rather what is the backup plan when we fail to stop them before their attacks?

Police are very important in fighting crime, but a lone officer in uniform faces an almost impossible task in stopping mass public shootings (Lott, 2010; Lott & Landes, 2003). Even a couple of officers have a very difficult job. Officers become the first targets in these attacks, as attackers know that if they kill the officer, they will have free reign to continue their massacre. Putting a guard in every school is also very costly. Florida will be spending a half billion dollars a year to put one police officer in each

public school (Bousquet, Mahoney, & Klas, 2018). But attackers can't know who is carrying a concealed firearm, and won't know who they need to attack first.

Police are also strongly in favor of abolishing gun-free school zones. Shortly after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, PoliceOne, a 450,000-member private organization of police (380,000 active, full-time and 70,000 retired officers), surveyed its members and found that 77 percent supported arming teachers and/or school staff (PoliceOne.com, 2013). Eighty-six percent of the officers believed that casualties in mass public shootings would have been reduced or altogether prevented if legally-armed citizens had been able to carry guns (see also Crime Prevention Research Center, 2018c, for surveys by the National Association of Chiefs of Police for their views on civilians carrying concealed handguns).

Allowing teachers and staff to carry concealed handguns is nothing new in the United States, and hasn't created any problems. Prior to the early 1990s, there were no state laws specifically restricting concealed carry on K-12 property. Twenty states currently allow at least some teachers and staff to carry, though the rules vary. Alabama, Utah, New Hampshire, and parts of Oregon allow all permitted teachers and staff to carry, without any additional training requirements (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2018a). Other states leave it to the discretion of the superintendent or school board. In Texas, about 172 school districts have teachers who carry (Brnger, 2018). In Ohio, at least 175 school districts allow concealed carry (Burns, 2016).

Clark Aposhian, the senior member of Utah's Concealed Firearm Review Board, estimates that roughly 5 percent of teachers in his state carry permitted concealed handguns at school. Support staff—including janitors, librarians, secretaries, and lunch staff—carry at a higher estimated rate of between 10 and 12 percent (C. Aposhian, personal communication, August 5, 2017).

There hasn't been a single mass public shooting in any school that allows teachers and staff to legally carry guns. School insurance rates bespeak the safety of these schools. "From what I've seen in Utah, rates have not gone up because of guns being allowed," says Curt Oda, former president of the Utah Association of Independent Insurance Agents (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2015a). A survey of schools in Arkansas, Kansas, Ohio, South Dakota, and Texas also did not indicate that teacher carry had caused an increase in insurance premiums (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2015a). Insurance fees significantly declined in Kansas.

The only accidental discharge by a permit holder on K-12 property occurred in Utah in 2014 and resulted in only a very minor injury (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2018b). A few other accidents have occurred during firearm training classes held outside of normal school hours. There have been no cases of a student getting a hold of a teacher's or staffer's gun.

People worry that students will discover which teachers or staff members are carrying guns. But carrying in a school isn't much different than carrying in other places. It's a very normal thing in many parts of the country, and you would never know that people are carrying in grocery stores, movie theaters, or restaurants. In 2018, over 17.25 million Americans had permits to legally carry a concealed handgun. Outside of California and New York, about 8.63 percent of the adult population can carry (Lott, 2018).

Others fear that permit holders in stopping these mass public shootings will accidentally shoot a bystander or that when police arrive they will shoot the permit holder. But despite permit holders recently stopping dozens of what would have been mass public shootings in malls, churches, schools, and businesses, neither scenario has ever happened (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2016). Nor have any of those teachers or staff committed crimes on school property, and permit holders tend to be extremely law-abiding. Permit holders lose their permit for any firearms violation at thousandths or tens of thousandths of one percent (Lott, 2010).

The term “gun-free zone” is what should really make people nervous, since police virtually always arrive after an attack has occurred. A survey of economists and criminologists who have published peer-reviewed empirical studies on gun control finds that by more than a two-to-one margin they believe that gun-free zones are more likely to attract criminals than they are to deter them (Lott and Mauser, 2016). Since 1950, all but seven mass public shootings in America have occurred where citizens are banned from carrying guns (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2015b).

Killers consciously select defenseless targets. Just look at the statements by the attackers in the 2015 Charleston, SC, church shooting and the 2012 theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2015d). A recent case ISIS sympathizer planned to massacre a church in Detroit. The FBI recorded him saying, “It’s easy, and a lot of people go there. Plus people are not allowed to carry guns in church” (Ley, 2016). In Europe, which has suffered three of the five worst K-12 school shootings in the world, every single mass public shooting has occurred in a gun-free zone (Crime Prevention Research Center, 2015c).

All of this shouldn't be surprising. Would you put a “Gun-Free Zone” sign on your home? Likely not. So we shouldn't be putting these signs on our schools. We need to protect children, not advertise their vulnerability.

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