

# HOT SHEET

## Guns In Schools

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THE STATISTICS ARE ALARMING: firearms are the leading cause of death for young people age 1-19 in California, according to the state Department of Health Services records. Youth homicides rose 111 percent in California from 1985 to 1993, due entirely to a 204 percent increase in gunshot homicides, according to the same source. And 49 percent of the high school students polled in a recent Los Angeles Unified School District study said they could “easily” get a gun.

But how many students are toting guns to school?

Despite terrifying headlines and political posturing that characterize guns on campus as an overwhelming concern, claims of tens or even one or two guns found daily on California campuses are probably massive exaggerations. Studies point out that one gun per school district per year is more likely, although finding an accurate measurement of the number of students who take guns to school is nearly impossible because there are no national or California databases that systematically track firearm possession by students, says Michael Furlong, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Counseling/Clinical/School Psychology program at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Most administrators have never dealt with a gun on campus, according to the 1995-96 California Safe Schools Assessment (CSSA). The CSSA report is the compilation of crime reports from each school district in the state. The study found that 9,688 incidents involving weapons were reported during the 1995-96 school year. Of the weapons, 5,453 were knives, 1,039 were guns, and 3,196 were classified as “other” types. When the statewide enrollment figure of 5,467,330 is weighed against the 1,039 gun incidents reported, a mere 0.019 percent of California students have been caught with guns on campus, or about one gun per school district per year.

Instead of attempting to count guns, schools should be finding ways to help students who fit profiles of those who would bring guns to campus, Furlong said in a recent interview. Generally speaking, weapon carrying among youth can be correlated with serious high-risk behaviors, such as having been arrested for or involved in robbery and/or assaults. Gun ownership and carrying is understood to be part of an extremely aggressive, rather than defensive, system of thought and behavior. Not all students bring guns to school to protect themselves; nor is it exclusively associated with obvious antisocial, delinquent behavior. A British Columbia study found that students who reported carrying a gun — both at school and elsewhere — were two times more likely to have engaged in a variety of risk-related behaviors, such as considering suicide, sexual activity, smoking cigarettes and marijuana, and binge drinking, Furlong said.

California

Association of

School

Psychologists

1400 K Street

Suite 311

Sacramento, CA

95814-3916

Tel 916-444-1595

Fax 916-444-1597



Strong associations have also been found between weapon possession and community and social conditions. The availability of guns, limited family support, unemployment, and the tacit acceptance of violence as a viable problem solving strategy are all positively correlated with youth gun use. Gun possession among youth is a function of being involved in an anti-social “gun culture” — a value system that accepts gun violence as a legitimate way of solving problems. Knowledge that a student owns a gun should be a red flag — and immediate action should be taken.

Several programs, methods and initiatives are being used to help quell the guns and the violence on California school campuses. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing recently issued the final report of its School Violence Advisory Panel that addresses many policy issues. After surveying students and all types of educators, the panel found that it is essential that educators examine school violence within the broad educational mission of schools. Effective violence prevention programs, the panel found, will do more than increase surveillance and discipline students who are prone to aggression. It is also necessary for all involved to teach children alternatives to violence and to acknowledge how adults contribute to the problem. Most importantly, the panel proposes to retain the focus on education and not solely on punishing incidents of violence. School violence prevention efforts must be placed within the context of social, institutional and community wide initiatives, the panel found. No amount of effort to prevent and mitigate violence in the schools will be successful unless the entire community is equally involved.

The panel developed a series of recommendations for teachers, school administrators, pupil personnel staff (including school psychologists) classified personnel, school board members, professional organizations and college and university trainers, students, parents, criminal justice personnel, community and social service providers, health and social service providers, and the Legislature. The panel recommends that all groups work together to establish programs to combat school violence. Selected recommendations from the panel include:

- Teachers should receive instruction in the knowledge and skill necessary to address their legal and professional responsibilities with regard to student behavior and school safety.
- School administrators should demonstrate positive attitudes toward students, parents and school personnel, and should possess the knowledge and skills which contribute to a

positive, stress-free school climate; the development and implementation of a school site safety plan; development of strategies for personal safety of staff; and encourage active parent participation.

- School districts should provide training in the following areas for classified personnel: conflict resolution and mediation; first aid; emergency response training; mandatory child abuse identification and reporting; drug and alcohol awareness; communication and listening skills; strategies for working with linguistic, ethnic, socioeconomically and developmentally diverse students; and skills in de-escalating confrontation.
- All California school boards should be required to have a clearly stated policy addressing school violence.
- All unions and other professional organizations should begin or continue to make their memberships aware of key issues and concerns regarding school violence by offering workshops, forums or other ways to communicate the latest in problems and solutions.
- College and university personnel with specialized knowledge in the areas of school violence prevention and intervention should provide in-service workshops.
- Students should assume an active role in the safe school planning process and become actively involved in the school policy decision making process. These students should include elected leaders as well as those students who exhibit leadership among their peers.
- Parents/caregivers should be key participants in the safe school planning process as well as other school governance committees. They should be given training in how to participate.
- Law enforcement agencies should develop programs that encourage officers to participate in prevention and/or early intervention activities on school campuses.

It's obvious that school districts do whatever they can to help ensure that students do not take guns onto campus. But they also should recognize that finding a gun in a student's possession means that the student is in need of counseling.

“We need to recognize that finding a gun is not an isolated issue,” Furlong said. “Are we going to reach out and educate in a proactive fashion or do we want to do it in a punitive fashion? These kids are candidates for special intervention.”