

CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS RESOURCE PAPER

GUNS IN SCHOOLS

Firearms continue to make youth violence more deadly. (G)un violence is beamed incessantly from movie and television screens, from the covers of best-selling books and from advertising space on public transportation. Young children must endure hearing gun shots in their neighborhoods, seeing guns in their schools and grieving when friends and relatives are shot and killed. Children live in fear. Many youths are convinced that gun possession is essential to survival. The vicious cycle of the gun culture continues. ("Reducing Access to Firearms," Policy Brief, Pacific Center for Violence Prevention, March, 1995.)

The statistics are alarming: firearms are the leading cause of death for young people age 1-19 in California.¹ Youth homicides rose 111 percent in California from 1985 to 1993, due entirely to a 204 percent increase in gunshot homicides.² 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.³

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 or two guns 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.

There are no national or California data bases that systematically track firearm possession by students, or staff for that matter.⁴ Student gun possession rates are estimated from various student self-report survey studies. Each of these surveys asks a different question and, consequently, has produced different results. For example, students are asked about "weapons" with no definition of what a weapon may be. Also, the time periods in these surveys range from "past month" to "past year" to "this school year."

Results of national surveys on gun use in the schools range from the oft-quoted 270,000 guns brought to school each day national figure from the American Psychological Association (1993), to the National Adolescent Health Survey (American School Health Association, 1989) in which 98.3 percent of secondary school students in a national sample reported that they had NOT carried a gun to school in the "last 12 months."

More recent studies continue the trend. An American Civil Liberties Union study⁵ found that more than 14 percent of the 1,082 Los Angeles high school students surveyed had said that they had brought weapons to school "at least once." It also found that 2.5 percent of the students said they had brought a gun to campus, which reflects estimates experts on school violence have made in recent years.⁶

In fact, for some students school may be an oasis from the violence they see every day in their neighborhoods. Glenn Schumacher, dean at West Valley High School in Hemet, California, and immediate past president of the California Association of School Psychologists, tells the story about a hardened gang member who was about to be expelled from his high school. The gang member said he wanted to stay in school because he felt safe there -- off the streets and away from the trouble spots in the neighborhood. Schumacher said the student later ended up in the hospital, the victim of a baseball-bat beating by a rival gang member. The beating took place off school property.⁷

There also are many reports of juvenile shootings near schools.⁸ In May 1997, a 15-year-old was shot while riding his bike in front of a Sacramento middle school just as classes were ending for the day. One of two suspects fired several rounds, hitting the 15-year-old in the

head and grazing his companion. A 14-year-old suspect was taken into custody on suspicion of attempted murder. Neither the suspect nor the victim were students of the middle school (the victim had graduated the year before), but students leaving the school that day were graphically reminded of the violence just outside the school's grounds. The incident apparently was gang related, a retaliation for a fistfight that occurred after school at a nearby elementary school.

The middle school, with 1,200 students, has worked hard in the past three years to keep the violence of the surrounding neighborhoods from spilling onto its grounds. Peer mediation, strict discipline and a dress code that bans gang colors and fashions has reduced the on-campus violence in recent years, according to school officials. Instead of the daily brawls that were common three years ago, the school now goes for weeks without an exchange of blows. Will C. Wood, the middle school in question, is one of the few schools in the Sacramento area to have two vice principals assigned full-time to discipline, a duty that requires constant vigilance and frequently involves mediating disputes between kids who emulate gang members.⁹

Schumacher said he, too, often settles disputes between students who want to be gang members. And, although he has taken knives and screwdrivers from students (screwdrivers being a popular weapon in today's schools) he has never had to deal with a gun on campus. The 1995-96 California Safe Schools Assessment (CSSA) shows that probably most school administrators have not found guns on their campuses.

The CSSA report¹⁰ 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.

Although homicide figures among youth are high (in 1992, 37 percent of all firearm-related deaths in California were between the ages of 10 and 25¹¹), there were only three homicides reported on school grounds during the 1995-96 school year -- all of them in Los Angeles County. CSSA did not report whether guns were used in the homicides.

Figures on the number of youths killed by firearms outside of school grounds during the 1995-96 school year in California are not available. However, there is ample evidence that many of California's children are being killed with guns in their communities.

Information the California Department of Health Services gleaned from death certificates filed between 1980 and 1989, shows that 5,717 deaths under age 21 were attributed to firearms, for an average of 10 per week. Nearly two thirds of these deaths were homicides, about one fourth were suicides and the rest were accidental. The California health agency showed that the level of homicide and gun-related deaths are not increasing. For example, the homicide rate among youth during 1980-1982 was higher than during 1987-1989, 7.8 per 100,000 versus 7.3 per 100,000, respectively. In comparison, data from the Uniform Crime Reports (U.S. Department of Justice, 1992) shows a nationwide 79 percent increase in youths committing homicides during the 1980s.

The Pacific Center for Violence Prevention, a non-profit agency based at San Francisco General Hospital that coordinates a five-year, \$40 million Violence Prevention Initiative project funded by the California Wellness Foundation, correlates a marked increase in the number of guns with its figures that show an increase in the number of youths killed by guns. The center estimates that 1,000 guns are purchased by Californians everyday¹² and that nationwide 10 children are killed everyday with handguns.¹³

But while different organizations produce different figures to help prove their points, the fact seems to remain that there really is no totally accurate way to count the number of guns on

campus. Michael Furlong, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Counseling/Clinical/School Psychology program at the University of California at Santa Barbara, says it may not be possible to get an accurate gun count.¹⁴ That's because school administrators don't see every gun brought onto campus, students may exaggerate on the self-report surveys and administrators may not be using the same reporting techniques. "How do you make sure that a principal in Lone Pine is handling it the same way as a principal in South Central L.A.?" Furlong asked rhetorically.

He added that some reported gun possession incidents are based on hearsay. "It's in essence counting the number of neighbors who called to report that something may have occurred," Furlong said.

Despite the lack of knowledge about the number of guns on school campuses, there is no reason to suspect that guns are more prevalent on California campuses than those of the rest of the nation.¹⁵ Nevertheless, school psychologists should be made aware of current gun possession data so they can be called upon to dispel myths when events heighten staff, student, or parent concerns about guns on campus. Strategies for dealing with guns on campus, information about youth who carry guns to school and the need for an understanding of gun possession as a broader, risk-ridden developmental process can be fostered by school psychologists.

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. 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. However, Furlong reports, most students who bring guns to school are only marginally involved in campus activities. 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.¹⁶ The same students were twice as likely to report that they had been physically abused, did not like school, or had skipped school.

Strong associations have also been found between weapon possession and community and social conditions. The availability of guns, limited family supports, unemployment, and the tacit acceptance of violence as a viable problem solving strategy are all positively correlated with youth gun use.

"The students that attend here know nothing but how to be violent," one student from Jordan High School in South Central Los Angeles wrote in the ACLU survey. "I also think the biggest cause of violence...is where the students live and how they live."¹⁷ At Jordan High School, 70 percent of those surveyed said they had witnessed a drive-by shooting near campus.

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. Although it is not the school psychologists' role to police or discipline student gun possession, they should be aware that youth gun possession is strongly associated with multiple developmental 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 Advisory Panel on School Violence, established by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing in Sacramento¹⁸, 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 increased surveillance and disciplining of 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 as well as becoming 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.
- School psychologists should select the appropriate level of prevention and intervention strategies. When violence-related incidents occur, they should be called upon immediately to provide support groups for victims and perpetrators.

There is a wealth of anti-violence programs currently in use at schools around the state that are going far to keep guns -- and violence -- away from students. Most of these programs

depend on the support of the community and partnerships between the schools and law enforcement, probation, public and mental health, alcohol and drug services, social welfare, parent groups, family support agencies and the business community. In some cases, grants are available from state, federal and private agencies to help implement school safety programs.

Examples of potentially promising approaches to enhancing school safety and providing positive learning environments include the following:¹⁹

- Lennox Middle School in Los Angeles offers a comprehensive approach which includes gang prevention activities, a Safe Haven Program with after school alternatives, a well-developed mediation strategy which is linked to instruction, and a parent education program.
- John F. Kennedy High School in Sacramento has an active Parents on Campus program in which parents are used as counselors four hours a day. This program has influenced the attitudes and atmosphere of the school, and has resulted in fewer conflicts on campus.

- David Starr Middle School in Burbank operates an After The Bell program which identifies high-risk and gang-involved students and builds their self-esteem by performing school service projects. Activities include academic tutoring, sports, computers and community connection. The Burbank School District also works with the Burbank Police Department and the Los Angeles Probation Department on behavioral, truancy and dropout problems.
- The O.K. Program stresses involvement between parents, schools, and the community through the use of teams. At Mills Middle School in Rancho Cordova, teams of O.K. Program's participants monitor students' grades and classroom citizenship, participate in study sessions and recreational activities, and reward students for doing well in school.
- Folsom High School in Folsom promotes cultural awareness through major events at the school, offers a safety hotline and conflict resolution program, provides group counseling sessions through a Student Assistance Program, and has a school police officer on campus. The combined efforts have resulted in fewer numbers of racial conflict and fights among students, established a more disciplined approach to school life, and increased the community's involvement in the school.
- Modesto City Schools in Modesto has a comprehensive partnership approach to school safety that includes an interagency safety committee at each school site, collaborative relationships between the police, probation, and the schools with two full-time police officers assigned to the school district plus a gang-prevention officer who visits each campus daily, and full-service family health centers located on two campuses.
- Mt. Diablo Unified School District in Concord merged its school safety task force and its drug free task force to produce funding and support from both the Concord and Pleasant Hill police departments for three full-time resource officers and the continuation of the DARE program. The first full-time, site-based probation officer was recently established at Mt. Diablo High School. These efforts resulted in a 50 percent reduction in period cuts and a 30 percent reduction in all-day truancy.
- Empressa Elementary School in Oceanside has a well-established peer mediator, intergroup relations and communication skills training program, a student leadership group, and parent involvement. The school also provides on-site mental health services through its Primary Intervention Program.

It's obvious that school districts do whatever they can to help ensure that students do not take guns onto campus. But, as with the programs mentioned above, 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."²⁰

California Association of School Psychologists, 1997.

Suggested Reading:

J. Dear and the Advisory Panel on School Violence, *Creating Caring Relationships to Foster Academic Excellence, Recommendations for Reducing Violence in California Schools Final Report*, State of California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, Sacramento, CA, October

1995. Contact the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing at 916/445-0184 for more information.

M. Furlong, C. Flam and A. Smith, "Firearm Possession in Schools: Disarming the Myth," *California School Psychologist*, 1996, Issue No. 1. The article was presented to the convention of the California Association of School Psychologists, San Francisco, Calif., March, 1995. Contact CASP at 916/444-1595

"Preventing Youth Violence: Reducing Access to Firearms," Policy Paper, Prevent Handgun Violence Against Kids, A Public Education Campaign, Pacific Center for Violence Prevention, San Rafael. The center has a number of fact sheets, policy papers, brochures and other informational pieces regarding gun use among youth in California. Contact 415/821-8209 for more information.

Promoting Safe Schools: Presenting the Results of the 1995-96 California Safe Schools Assessment, A partnership of the California Department of Education and the Butte County Office of Education, Calif., March 1997. Contact the Butte County Office of Education at 916/538-6929.

O'Sullivan, M. And Calhoun, D., *Taking Action: Passing Local Ordinances to get Kitchen Table Gun Dealers Out of Your Neighborhood and a Dozen Other Steps Toward Preventing Violence in Your California Community*, Women Against Gun Violence & Youth ALIVE!, Oakland, Calif., May 1995. Contact Youth ALIVE! at 510/444-6191.

Sugarmann, J. And Rand, K., *Cease Fire: A Comprehensive Strategy to Reduce Firearms Violence*, Violence Policy Center, Washington, DC., 1994. Contact 202/822-8200.

Teret, S. P. and Wintemute, G. J., "Policies to Prevent Firearm Injuries," *Health Affairs*, Winter, 1993. For a copy contact 301/656-7401.

Wintemute, G. J., *Ring of Fire: The Handgun Makers of Southern California*, Violence Prevention Research Program, Sacramento, Calif., 1994. Contact 916/227-3509.

The National School Safety Center also offers additional research material on school violence. Contact 805/373-9977.

Endnotes:

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1. State of California, Department of Health Services, Death Records, 1995.
 2. Emergency Preparedness and Injury Control (EPIC) Branch. Violent Injuries to California Youth, Sacramento, CA: California Department of Health Services, September, 1996, Report No. 7, p. 18.
 3. Associated Press, "Study: Weapons no rarity in L.A. schools," *The Sacramento Bee*, March 11, 1997, p. A-4. The study, conducted in 1995 and 1996 by the American Civil Liberties Union, California State University Los Angeles and the University of Southern California, was titled "From Words to Weapons: The Violence Surrounding Our Schools."

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4. M. Furlong, et al., "Firearm Possession in Schools: Disarming the Myths," *California School Psychologist*, Sacramento, CA, 1996.
 5. Associated Press, "Study: Weapons no rarity in L.A. schools."
 6. M. Furlong, "Firearm Possession in Schools: Disarming the Myth."
 7. Glenn Schumacher, telephone interview, May 6, 1997.
 8. Bazar, E. and Chiu, Y., "Shots near school critically injure teen," *The Sacramento Bee*, May 21, 1997, p. B-1.
 9. Ibid.
 10. "Promoting Safe Schools: Presenting the Results of the 1995-96 California Safe Schools Assessment," a report to the State Legislature, California Department of Education and the Butte County Office of Education, March 1997, p. 11.
 11. "Youth Want You to Know" Fact Sheet, Pacific Center for Violence Prevention. Information taken from the California Department of Health Services Death Records, 1992.
 12. "Preventing Youth Violence: Reducing Access to Firearms," Policy Paper, Pacific Center for Violence Prevention, p. 5. The center cites the California Department of Justice's automated firearms system county-by-county count from 1986 through March 1993.
 13. "Youth Want You to Know," Fact Sheet, Pacific Center for Violence Prevention. The center based the figure on data from the Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Health Statistics, WONDER System, Compressed Mortality, 1991.
 14. Michael Furlong, telephone interview, May 19, 1997.
 15. M. Furlong, "Firearm Possession in Schools."
 16. Ibid.
 17. Associated Press, "Study: Weapons no rarity in L.A. schools."
 18. J. Dear and the Advisory Panel on School Violence, *Creating Caring Relationships to Foster Academic Excellence*, Commission on Teacher Credentialing, Sacramento, CA, October, 1995, Page 78.
 19. "Promoting Safe Schools," p. 5.
 20. M. Furlong, interview, May 19, 1997.