

**Proposed Policies to Reduce Weapons in Schools:
Based on Research from an Ecological Conceptual Model**

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Introduction

On Wednesday, Feb. 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz entered Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, his former school, opened fire, and massacred 17 students and staff members. The name of the school and the victims are now added to a long, ever-growing list of families, schools, and communities devastated by weapons on school grounds. Many Americans express through the media concern that without dramatic new actions and policies, we will be unable to stop mass school shootings.

This chapter offers a public health prevention perspective that goes beyond the policy responses to tragic and reoccurring mass shootings of the past two decades. It is based on our book *Bullying and School Violence in Evolving Contexts* (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019), and presents additional insights that have evolved over time and respond to ever-changing school incidents involving weapons. We start with a theoretical framework that proposes new avenues for understanding and addressing weapons in school. We explain that the phrase “weapons in schools”, including weapons brought to school, threats with weapons, and even seeing or knowing of another student on school grounds carrying a weapon. We further discuss who the victim is when a weapon is brought to school, how to balance educational and justice system (penal) responses and who is responsible and accountable for incidents of weapon presence and use in schools. For each of these issues we present the implications for

policy and legal response and critique common approaches to addressing weapons in schools, such as “zero-tolerance” policies.

A Theoretical Framework

This chapter approaches bullying, school violence, and weapons in schools from the unique vantage point of an empirically supported theoretical model developed by the authors (Astor & Benbenishty, in press; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). While school safety and bullying have attracted interest by the public—including policymakers, legislators, practitioners, and scholars—almost all this attention has focused on the individual student as a bully, a victim, a bully-victim, or a bystander. Even theories that include an ecological perspective tend to focus on the student in the center of the ecological model and aim to understand how this ecology impacted other students (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2010). We focus on the school as a context, putting the *school in the center* of our ecological mode, and examining the school as embedded in nested and evolving contexts. This has great implications when thinking about policies needed to prevent weapons in schools.

Our integrative model positions the school in the center and assesses the impact of outside influences including the student body, family demographics and characteristics, the neighborhood in which families and the school are located, the broader community in which the school is located, and the larger cultural and ethnic environment of both students and the larger society. The school is also embedded in a hierarchical organizational structure, being part of a district, county, state, and national government structure that also affects the school.

These outside influences, however, do not predetermine what happens in the school. The school’s internal context, including its organization and climate, moderates and mediates outside influences and helps shape the students’ experiences, perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. Our model presents the links among victimization, involvement in school

violence, bullying, safety, and student outcomes such as academic functioning, emotional well-being, and both risky and pro-social behaviors.

These links among organizational characteristics, climate, violence, and safety outcomes are bidirectional because of their reciprocity over time (R. Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; R. Benbenishty, Astor, Roziner, & Wrabel, 2016). Although feeling unsafe in school might be the immediate result of exposure to victimization, it might also influence student involvement in future violence, such as increasing the perceived need to bring a weapon to school for self-defense (R. Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Similarly, victimization might increase risky behaviors such as sex and alcohol or drug consumption, which in turn might lead to more involvement in bullying.

According to our model, two major forces shape the school's internal context: the organizational climate and structure (e.g., the principal leadership and cohesiveness of the educational staff) and the social climate (e.g., how supportive are teachers of their students). These internal contexts mediate and moderate the relationships among school violence, bullying, safety, and student outcomes (Berkowitz et al., 2017). For instance, the presence of fair and consistent rules and high levels of social support might ameliorate the negative impact of victimization on safety. Astor, Benbenishty, and Estrada (2009) showed that school leaders can be a strong internal force that helps the school overcome outside influences and effectively secure resources, implement policies and programs that reduce risk behaviors, enhance student well-being, and promote higher academic achievement. Their work showed that some of these leaders were able to promote their schools, even under very difficult circumstances.

Finally, the model suggests that school violence, bullying, safety, and student outcomes are dynamic and ever-evolving. What is happening in the school might also

influence its external contexts, which in turn influence the school. For instance, A. Benbenishty and Benbenishty (2015) provided examples of how positive changes in school climate attracted new groups of students, which helped move schools toward greater academic success, which in turn helped change the composition of the student body (e.g., students with stronger academic credentials registered to the school) and involvement in the school by the community (A. Benbenishty & Benbenishty, 2007).

The other dynamic aspect of the model positions the school on a historical axis. Changing times are reflected in the model in numerous ways. Over time, a school's external contexts might change considerably, influencing its internal contexts. As normative, legal, and policy frameworks change, schools respond. For instance, the enormous increase in recent years in the availability of safe school and anti-bullying policies and programs, along with the public's concerns about safety, have changed how schools prioritize and invest in bullying prevention programs. In the United States, the new Every Student Succeeds Act, provides (under section 4108) federal funding to develop and implement programs and activities aimed at reducing the school discipline gap, including bullying and harassment prevention. This might create more interest in school climate accountability systems. Such federal and state-level accountability pressures and funding opportunities might trickle down and influence principals' and school board members' perception of the importance of students' safety and social and emotional well-being relative to their academic achievement.

Weapons in school have a "whole-school" impact. This is true for the effects on students, staff members, and even parents who are very concerned when they hear about weapons in their child's school. When members of the school community (i.e., administrators, educators, students, and parents) are involved with weapons, for instance when a student is threatened with a weapon in front of a teacher and the administrators and parents are notified, the school *as an entity* changes, and these changes might have reciprocal effects on the school

community. When a school realizes that there are many weapons brought to school and students fear for their safety, it impacts how the school functions in all areas. Weapons on school grounds increase fear among teachers and students, and that, in turn, reduces the ability of educators to teach and of students to learn. High involvement with weapons on school grounds might also impact teacher-student relationships, trust in the leadership of the principal, parents' support for the school, and other aspects of school climate.

Another example of how weapons change schools are the responses sparked by the presence of weapons and accompanying threats to safety. Many schools overwhelmed by high weapon involvement might respond with severe security measures such as searches, metal-detectors, the presence of cameras, armed guards, etc. These prison-like, "environmental" responses change how individual students and staff members see their school, and their functioning in the school.

In the following sections, we use our "school in the center" approach to examine multiple aspects of weapon involvement in school and their implications for policy and law. We start by clarifying how our focus on the unique characteristics of the school as a context shapes our understanding of the meaning of "weapons in school."

What Do We Mean by 'Weapons in Schools?'

Currently, the public and academic research community focus mostly on use of firearms in mass shootings, largely overlooking other types of weapons or uses of weapons (for some exceptions see: Astor, Benbenishty, Meyer, & Rosemond, 2004; Gilreath, Astor, Cederbaum, Atule, & Benbenishty, 2014; Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007). Given the greater casualties and injuries caused by firearms, this restricted focus is understandable, but other potentially lethal weapons are far more prevalent in schools. Policies surrounding weapons that go far beyond responses to mass shootings are sorely needed.

In fact, more than any other historical set of events, the school shootings of the past two decades were the primary force behind increased legislation, funding, policy, programs, and intervention strategies (Kupchik, Brent, & Mowen, 2015; Nekvasil, Cornell, & Huang, 2015). Most of the research following shootings and weapon use has focused on identifying potential shooters who might kill innocent students and staff members. Programs were developed to prevent such events and prepare school staff members to respond to them effectively (Cornell, 2013; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, see a metaanalysis in Mitchell & Palk, 2016). Consequently, empirical inquiries have tried to identify situations, people, personality profiles, or crisis prevention strategies to identify mass shooters or reduce the number of deaths when these horrific acts occur (Blair & Schweit, 2014; Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, & Browne, 2016).

This focus on mass shootings and firearms/guns, to the almost total neglect of mere presence of (and students' awareness of) weapons in school and of threats or non-lethal use of weapons on school grounds (including failed attempts to harm is not productive. National, state, and local policies have failed to respond to data showing that even when not used in lethal incidents, weapons are common on school grounds and affect many students.

The main goal of many scientists and policymakers is to protect schools against mass shootings. Based on the rarity of mass shooting events, researchers question whether state and local policies are investing these resources in the right place and directed to the right issue. The singular focus of the public dialogue and research often limits how the problem is defined and approached. We argue that understanding the meaning of weapons on school grounds for students and teachers might go far beyond the effects of a mass shooting.

Firearm deaths in schools, although tragic and devastating, are actually extremely rare, compared with other settings, such as neighborhoods and other public places (e.g., Nekvasil, Cornell, & Huang, 2015). Weapons in school can cause students short- and long-

term social, academic, and psychological harm even if a weapon is never actively used. Weapons also affect staff members and parents in powerful ways, even when no one is murdered with a firearm in the school. Even hearing a rumor about a student bringing a weapon to school with the intention of harming someone else has negative implications for school safety and the well-being of its staff members and students. Hence, a much wider perspective on weapon use and involvement in school is required.

Further, while much of the attention is on guns in school, there are many more potential weapons students might bring to school grounds. Students have easy access to knives, baseball bats, clubs, stones, bricks, metal objects, and can even use chairs or tables as weapons. Use of such objects on school grounds could have negative emotional, physical and even lethal effects on victims and witnesses. Policies at all levels addressing these events are absent and needed.

Are Weapons, Threats with Weapons and Awareness of Weapons Prevalent in Schools?

Large-scale historical and contemporary data suggest that weapons are present in schools far more than policymakers, the public, and even many school safety researchers realize, and that their presence is adversely affecting a large number of students and teachers. Yet because of the current focus on "successful" mass shootings, this data is insufficiently analyzed and used to shape policy. Our survey more than half a million students (seventh, ninth and 11th graders) from 1,849 different schools in California (Table 1) illustrates the patterns that require new policies. The data below represent 2011-2013, and the patterns are similar for data collected by the Department of Education in California every year over the past decade or longer.

Table 1

Student-Level Distribution (Percentage) of Weapon-Related Behaviors (N = 528,436)

	Carried a Gun	Carried a Knife or Club	Threatened or Injured with a Gun, Knife, or Club	Saw a Gun, Knife, or Other Weapon
0 times	96.0	92.0	93.2	76.7
1 time	1.6	3.4	3.6	11.7
2 or 3 times	0.9	1.7	1.5	5.9
4 or more times	1.5	2.9	1.7	5.7
At least once	4.0	8.0	6.8	23.3

These California data, representing nearly all secondary schools in the most populous state of the union, show that 4% of students reported bringing a gun to school and 8% reported bringing a knife, while 6.8% were threatened or injured with a gun, knife, or a club. Additionally, 23.3% *saw* a gun, knife, or other weapon on school grounds. This means that in any given year, between a fifth and a quarter of all secondary school students in California, representing more than half a million young persons--have seen, been threatened by, or brought a weapon to school. Nationwide, probably millions of students each year have such experience with weapons in schools. And we do not know how many have heard about (rather than seeing with their own eyes) the presence of a weapon in school. That could be many millions more. .

Our focus on the school context raises another question, with major implications for policy and law: Are levels of weapon involvement fairly similar across schools, so that a single set of policies might cover all schools, or is it the case that weapon involvement is concentrated in a relatively small number of schools with particular characteristics, such that policies should be tailored to these extreme cases? Our findings in California reveal that certain phenomena are prevalent in a broad range of schools, but a small number of schools are experiencing extremely high levels of weapon involvement. Table 2 presents the findings supporting this conclusion.

Table 2

Distribution (Percentage) of Weapon-Related Behaviors in Schools (N = 1,849)

Percentage of Students	Carried a Gun	Carried Knife or Club	Threatened or Injured with a Weapon	Saw Someone Carrying a Weapon
0.00	10.2	4.3	4.8	0.5
0.01–1.99	11.2	0.9	1.5	0.0
2.00–3.99	32.7	7.4	10.0	0.1
4.00–5.99	22.5	14.0	21.4	0.2
6.00–7.99	21.3	19.8	22.0	0.8
8.00–14.99	9.0	39.5	33.3	9.8
15.00 +	3.3	12.1	7.0	88.6

Of particular note: 10.2% of secondary schools had *no reports* by students that they had carried a gun to school, 3.3% of schools had 15% or more of their students reporting that they had done so. In contrast, nearly all schools had at least some students report having seen a weapon in school, and in almost 90% of schools 15% or more of students reported seeing a weapon in school. School safety policy in the U.S. and worldwide does not address these situations, whatsoever.

This pattern of findings in California replicates our findings of a nationally representative sample of more than 24,000 Israeli students (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). We found that in 17% of schools none of the students reported being threatened with a weapon, and in about a quarter of the schools the percentage of threatened students was 2.7% or fewer. However, in 5% of the schools about a quarter of the students were threatened, and in 2% of schools about a third of the students reported being threatened with a weapon.

Two lessons can be learned from these findings. First, in almost all high schools in California, sizable numbers of students know of the presence of a weapon on their school's grounds at least once during a school year. The impact such knowledge has on students' perception of school safety, sense of connectedness to the school, and willingness to even

attend school is likely to be great. One set of policies should therefore address students' awareness of weapons in a very large number of schools. Second, given that some schools experience extremely high levels of weapons in school, another set of policies should focus on the small number of schools that have a larger number of weapons; these schools require immediate support and resources for weapon reduction before students are hurt. Some of these school may already have extra security measures (e.g., metal detectors, resource officers), but others may have not been identified yet. Moreover, while some of these schools have been 'fortified', many still need additional educational and mental health supports to prevent weapon-related violence.

Both sets of policies require a different conceptual model than the one used only to avert rare catastrophic events. Examples of new policies and practices needed include those that delineate how a school should respond to bystander students who provide information on a weapon brought to school, and how educators and professionals should handle threats being made with a weapon or threats that weapons will be brought to school to "settle a score."

In order to implement these policies, it is important for states, school districts, and counties to identify the schools that have a concentration of students who experience a range of weapon-related behaviors and target them in a comprehensive manner. To achieve this goal, it is essential to survey all students and staff members in all schools and listen to their voices regarding exposure to all kinds of weapons. More importantly, the surveys need to be analyzed in ways that would help identify individual schools that stand out in their extreme levels of weapon involvement so that interventions are implemented in these schools. Table 2 is an example of how categories of high-risk schools can be identified in a populous state like California, with over 10,000 schools.

"At-risk" schools should receive additional resources, such as funding to improve physical facilities, additional training for school staff members, and increased availability of

pupil personnel such as social workers and counselors. These resources could also include enhanced after-school educational and recreational opportunities for students. Alternative schools that serve students who have brought weapons to school and were subsequently expelled from their home school warrant specific attention and additional support.

Who is the Victim When There are Weapons on School Grounds?

In many contexts, it is quite simple to identify the perpetrator and the victim. This distinction leads to sanctions against the perpetrator and remedies for the victim. But this dichotomy is not easy to make in the school context. Students who may feel unsafe and victimized by weapons carried out by others may bring weapons to school to self-protect, and become perpetrators. Further, policies therefore need to address not only the apparent perpetrator and victim in an isolated incident, but also the many bystanders and “uninvolved” students and staff members--indeed, the school as a whole. When a potentially lethal weapon such as a gun or knife is on school grounds, a large proportion of students might become aware of its presence through discussion, social media, and rumors during, before, and after school hours. Their knowledge of a weapon on school grounds or other risky peer behavior diminishes their sense of safety at school, yet they are compelled to attend school. Thus, even being a bystander or knowing about a weapon in school can produce a feeling of victimization or vulnerability, even when one is not oneself threatened.

Yet bystanders are implicitly expected to ignore their knowledge of weapons in school or even their own experiences of witnessing weapons on campus and focus instead on academics. This would be difficult for anyone to do in a work or home setting where similar cause for fear existed. These bystanders need to be considered in any educational and psychological responses to weapons on school grounds. Currently, support for bystanders is provided only in the aftermath of a tragic shooting in school.

Furthermore, there is convincing evidence that students who are victims of incidents involving weapons on school grounds are more likely to become perpetrators—that is, themselves bringing weapons to school (Astor & Benbenishty, in press; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Marsh, McGee, & Williams, 2011; Valdebenito, Ttofi, Eisner, & Gaffney, 2017). Consider a student who has never been personally involved with physical violence, never carried a weapon, never been threatened with a weapon. When this bystander student hears a rumor that a peer brought a potentially lethal weapon to school, that in itself could cause such fear that the student himself or herself then brings a weapon to school, for self-defense. And they might even use the weapon if threatened by another student. Our California study revealed substantial intercorrelations between the various weapon-related behaviors.

Table 3

Intercorrelations between Weapon-Related Behaviors at the Student and School Levels

	1. Carried a gun	2. Carried a knife or club	3. Threatened or injured with a weapon	4. Saw someone carrying a weapon
1. Carried a gun	-	.50*	.43*	.25*
2. Carried a knife or club	.73*	-	.41*	.35*
3. Threatened or injured with a weapon	.67*	.68*	-	.33*
4. Saw someone carrying a weapon	.45*	.60*	.57*	-

Note. Student-level correlations reported above the diagonal and school-level correlations reported below the diagonal.

* $p < .01$.

Table 3 shows that individual students who carry a gun are also likely to carry a knife and also to be threatened or injured with a weapon, suggesting that many students are both victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, school-level correlations indicate that schools with

many students bringing weapons are also schools with more students being threatened and injured with these weapons. Similarly, findings from Israel show that students who were highly victimized were more likely to bring a weapon to school (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005).

In sum, policy makers need to grasp the broader scope of victimization, in terms of the types of conduct that inflict harm, the types of harm students incur, and the range of students affected, as well as how the perpetrator-victim dichotomy breaks down in the school environment

Gang Members as Perpetrators and Victims

The complex relationships between victimization and perpetration might be most evident when we consider the special case of gang members in schools. Studies conducted by our team showed that in California, 8.5% of students identified as gang members. Students who identified as gang members accounted for 41% of students statewide who reported bringing a gun to campus and 27% of all those who brought other potentially lethal weapons to school grounds (Estrada, 2011).

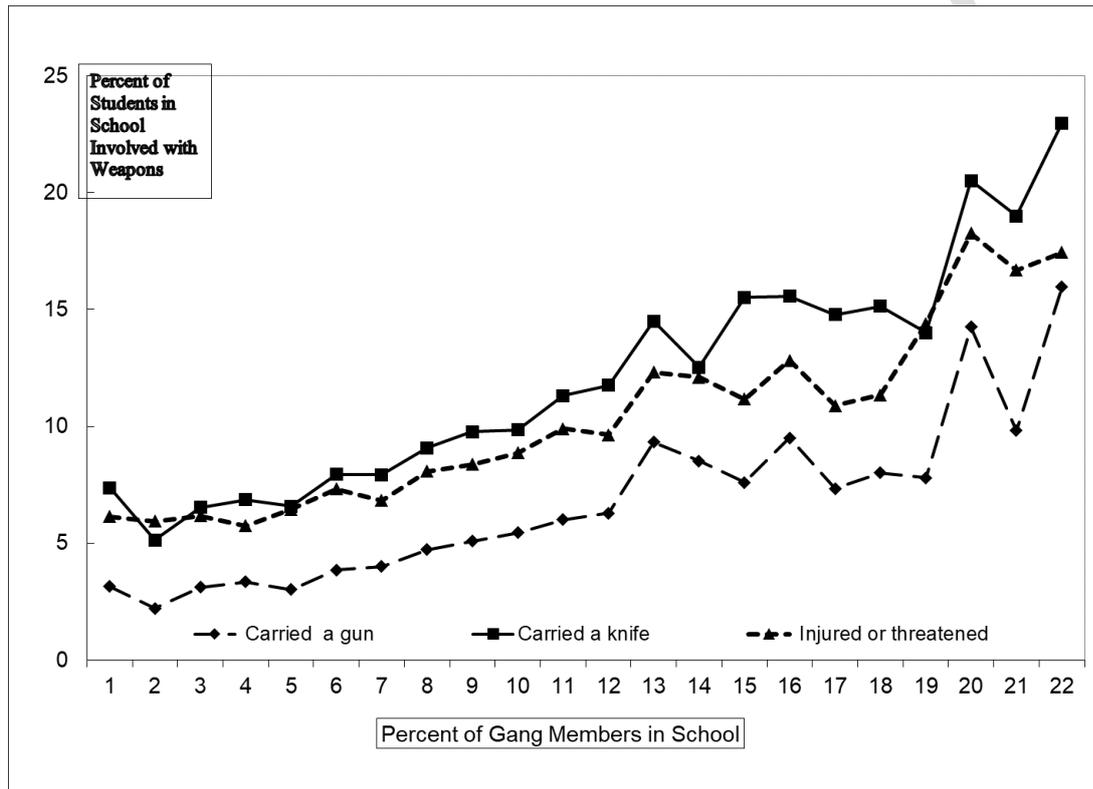
A more recent study in California shows that being a gang member significantly increases a student's chances of carrying a weapon, being threatened by a weapon, and seeing a weapon on school grounds (Astor & Benbenishty, in press). These data identify gang members as a group with high potential for being both more active perpetrators and victims, especially with regard to weapon involvement. Furthermore, as Chart 1 shows, there is evidence to suggest that schools with a larger number of gang members experience more weapon-related behaviors, in a magnitude that goes beyond the simple aggregation of the effects of the individual gang members.

The horizontal axis of Chart 1 represents the percentage of students in school who self-identified as gang-members. The vertical axis presents the percentage of students in school who reported carrying a gun, a knife, or being injured. The chart clearly shows that

when schools have more gang members, they also have many more students reporting multiple types of involvement with weapons.

[Insert Chart 1 about here]

Chart 1. School-Level Percentage of Students Involved with Weapons by Percentage of Gang Members in School



Any policies or legal interventions must take into account these important aspects of the intersection between gang membership and weapon use. They must integrate programs aimed at improving school safety, responding to presence of weapons in school, and reducing gang membership. Policies regarding gangs in school should also reflect our recommendation that we identify schools with a large concentration of weapon-related behaviors. Schools with an especially large number of gang members might require a different approach than other schools.

Who is Accountable and Needs Support When there are Weapons Incidents in School?

Our analysis of the school context and the organizational contexts in which the school is embedded (Astor & Benbenishty, in press) suggests that when there are weapons in school, persons in multiple organizational positions should be seen as responsible and accountable for the incident. At the same time, these same persons need to be supported, as part of comprehensive policies.

Clearly, students who are involved in bringing weapons or using them are accountable for these behaviors. Given that almost all of them are minors, their parents might also be held accountable. Our focus on the school as a context suggests that even school, district, and state officials might be held accountable, and would need to show that they were carrying out policies to help reduce weapon-related issues and responding effectively when such incidents were imminent or had already taken place. The reason for holding such officials accountable is not to spread blame. It is because they need to work together with school employees and receive public support for doing so. Our model of school in context acknowledges that a school is part of an organizational hierarchy: schools are embedded in districts that are nested in counties and states. Each organizational level influences all the others. A school-based approach recognizes the role that school leaders play, and leverages regional and national policies and legislation to empower them and provide the resources and authority to prevent weapon-related incidents in schools. Policies and legislation need to specify what is expected of the school, the district, and state leaders and which resources and powers they are provided, so that they can carry out their important mission in this area.

To illustrate, we suggest that policies require school leaders to actively gather information on an ongoing basis from students, staff members, and parents on the presence of weapons in school and use this knowledge to design immediate and long-term responses. This data could suggest to school leaders a duty and clear expectation for action. At the same

time, it could help outline duties on and expectations from district and state leaders to provide the resources, guidance, and support for school leaders. Principals need resources and training on how to implement measures such as an anonymous tip line, and how to develop, employ, and interpret school surveys to help assess levels of weapon-related issues, at risk groups, and changes over time.

The Role of District, Regional, and State-Level Leadership

Regional and state leaders might realize that a statewide program designed to help all schools become aware of the potential for weapon-related incidents is more cost-effective than requiring each individual school to develop such capacity. With today's technologies, it might soon be possible to develop powerful state-level algorithms that help process the large amounts of integrated data collected through the police, education departments, and statewide surveys to help identify at-risk schools, in which more students see weapons and feel threatened, and which are embedded in neighborhoods that show many converging warning signs of potential weapon-related violence.

Another important site of policy and program development is expulsion of students, which is currently a mandatory response to many weapon-related infractions. A school might be held accountable if a student is not expelled despite bringing a weapon to school. We believe district, county, or state leaders should be held accountable if expelled students are not integrated into an alternative education system and re-integrated to a regular school when appropriate.

Developing the Empirical Base for Policy and Law on Weapons at School

A central policy implication of this wider perspective on weapons in school is the need to conduct more research on weapon-related events that do not necessarily lead to mass shootings—for example, everyday experiences of students who witness weapons in schools as bystanders or who are victims of threats with weapons, even if not physically harmed. We

need to understand better how a rumor about a weapon in school spreads and under what circumstances a student would share the information with school authorities. We also need to understand better how students who feel threatened become perpetrators and bring weapons to school.

A central policy recommendation is to create the appropriate mechanisms to collect and regularly document data on all weapon-related issues in schools. This could be done as a combination of mandatory documentation and reporting of weapon-related incidents on school grounds, and periodic anonymous surveys of students, staff members, and parents.

More importantly, it is essential to develop mechanisms to analyze this empirical information, disseminate it, and use it for the development of policies and legal responses. Presently, evidence suggests data are not being collected on a wide range of issues pertaining to weapons in school. Furthermore, even when such data exist, as we exemplify with the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), school authorities, on all levels, tend to ignore them, despite their enormous potential usefulness. We therefore recommend that policies and legal requirements for school authorities specify what data need to be collected and documented as well as how the data should be processed and implemented in practice.

Moving Forward: Balance Educational, Legal, and Social Justice Responses

Policy and legal responses to weapons need to take into account a school's unique educational mission. Fortification of schools with prison-like measures such as metal detectors, closed-circuit cameras, and armed guards might create a climate that is not conducive to achieving that mission (Jonson, 2017). The presence of armed school resources officers might deter some students from bringing weapons to school, but it also has contributed to the "school-to-prison pipeline," as more minority-race students are removed from the regular educational system and placed in the juvenile justice system (Owens, 2017; Ryan et al., 2018).

We suggest as an underlying principle that, as much as possible, educational approaches and nonpunitive programs be used to prevent weapons in school. More punitive and legal remedies, such as expulsion and referrals to the juvenile justice system, should be limited to more extreme and dangerous instances. Even before the mass shooting in Columbine, Colorado, concerns about gun violence led to the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which withheld educational funding from states that did not adopt zero-tolerance laws. These laws essentially mandated expelling students who brought a firearm to school for at least one year and referring them to the juvenile criminal justice system. While these policies initially targeted the most severe threats to students' security, throughout the years states and school districts significantly expanded the focus of zero-tolerance policies to encompass also ordinary schoolyard fights, verbal abuse, possession of tobacco or alcohol, chronic tardiness, and prolonged absenteeism (e.g., Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Sughrue, 2003). There is emerging consensus that zero-tolerance policies, in their present form, are ineffective and have many unintended negative consequences. As an American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) concluded, there is little evidence that these policies increase safety or reduce victimization.

Even if zero-tolerance policies and legislation could be implemented effectively and show significant impact in reducing weapon-related problems on school grounds, they should also be examined from the perspective of social justice. In practice, they impact certain vulnerable groups (such as minority students and students in poor schools) much more than can be explained by their behaviors, strongly suggesting that educators are biased against these groups (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Mowen & Parker, 2017). Thus, a large number of youths already at great disadvantage educationally and economically are deprived of education and enter the justice system at early age, further diminishing their prospects for a productive, self-sufficient, and rewarding life as adults.

Recently, after the Parkland, Florida school shooting, the national debate has focused on questions of arming teachers, stationing more police and security guards on school grounds, installing bullet proof glass, and changing the physical structures of schools. The term “hardening” schools rather than “softening” schools is now being used frequently instead of the words “zero tolerance,” but many of the components of hardening are exactly the same as zero tolerance approaches. What the discussions seem to ignore is that many of the shootings happened in places that already have many security guards and police officers with guns.

Given the wealth of information on zero-tolerance policies; our knowledge of school climate, victimization, and weapons in school; and our personal and professional values, we suggest the following principles:

Protect students from exposure to weapons on school grounds.

Students should not be exposed in any way to any kind of weapons in school.

Integrate and sequence a range of approaches

Schools should address weapon-related issues by integrating various approaches in a gradual, sequential nature that reflects the seriousness of weapon involvement:

- a. Build a positive school climate that includes both teacher support and fair and consistent rules (“authoritative climate”; Cornell, Huang, et al., 2016; Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2016). This will help build trust and safety, reduce the number of students who feel the need to bring weapons for self-defense, and increase the effectiveness of methods such as tip lines (see for instance a tip line in Ohio https://saferschools.ohio.gov/content/tip_line_information).

- b. School leaders should employ fair and consistent *discretion* in responding to weapon involvement, taking into account factors such as the gravity of the offense, recidivism, and any mitigating circumstances.
- c. Deploy a wide array of responses, including ongoing educational interventions (such as class discussions on the perils of weapons on school grounds), counseling, restorative justice measures implemented as part of school policies, suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to the juvenile justice system.
- d. Accompany disciplinary actions with local monitoring of school responses and their association with student and family characteristics (e.g., poverty, special needs, minority status) and the circumstances of triggering events, to ensure fairness and consistency.
- e. Integrate professional development regarding fair and effective disciplinary responses into implementation of disciplinary processes.

Listen to the students' voices

School leaders must listen carefully to students so that students can provide information regarding their experiences in school. Reports of seeing a weapon in school or hearing a rumor about the presence of a weapon on school grounds could serve as an early warning sign and a call to action. Such reports could be made through anonymous tiplines, hotlines, and school-based surveys like the CHKS in California and local Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System surveys in other locations (<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm>). In schools that create positive and trusting relationships between students and staff members, students are more forthcoming in sharing what they know, despite concerns about being considered “tattlers.” The information might, among other things, facilitate mapping of particularly dangerous places on school grounds (Astor & Benbenishty, in press; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2004). After

soliciting information from students, school leaders must use the information and communicate to them how their voices informed policy.

Nevertheless, as seen in recent cases, information about potential risk is not easily shared, in part because of privacy concerns, which are embodied in laws such as the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; 20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99). A case study on a school shooting in Colorado (2013) found that a shooter presented more than 30 “red flag” behaviors in the weeks, months, and years before the shooting (Goodrum, Woodward, & Thompson, 2017). A large number of students, pupil personnel staff members, educators, and administrators knew about some of these behaviors, but none knew about all of them, as they were not consistently documented and were not shared with appropriate staff members. For instance, when an administrator suspended a student for threatening behavior, he informed the teachers but did not share the reasons for the suspension or the findings of the threat assessment carried out in school.

In addition to organizational obstacles related to sharing and acting on information, the researchers noted that school and district officials had misunderstandings about FERPA and did not realize that it permits school officials to share records *without the permission* of a student or the student’s parents with other school officials who have a “legitimate educational interest” and “in cases of health and safety emergencies.” Chapman (2009) noted that indeed, the language and interpretation of the emergency exception is not fully clear. Hence, it is important to educate all school constituencies on the appropriate ways to share information, in ways that do not infringe unnecessarily on the privacy of students and their families.

Students who are expelled should not be abandoned

School districts (or the counties in which they are located) need to develop appropriate educational responses (such as alternative schools) to ensure that expelled

students are integrated into an alternative educational framework. These educational facilities should support them while they are expelled and prepare them to reintegrate with the regular school system, whenever possible. Accountability systems need to encompass this group of extremely vulnerable group of students to ensure that they are part of the educational system and are expected to make progress academically and socially.

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