



The Impact of Weapons and Violence on Schools and Surrounding Communities: A Congressional Briefing on Capitol Hill

Weapons and violence in schools are a significant public health challenge that affects the physical and mental health of young people across the United States, as well as their families and communities. The Congressional Social Work Caucus (chaired by Rep. Barbara Lee, CA-13), in conjunction with the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, National Academy of Education, and American Educational Research Association organized a congressional briefing on June 12, 2019, to address the issue with a panel of scholars, experts, and activists. The content of this policy brief is a result of the discussion and recommendations from the briefing.

Background

Violence in schools impacts the physical and mental health of young people across the country. While death is the most devastating result, violence – particularly by firearm – has far-reaching ramifications, and weapons on school grounds can have negative emotional and physical effects on victims, and witnesses.¹ The trauma from gun violence exposure can negatively affect children's and teens' psychological and mental well-being, school performance, and can influence risk behaviors well into adulthood.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the second leading cause of death for people 10 to 34 years of age; approximately one out of every fifteen high school students reports attempting suicide each year.² Firearms are the most common method of suicide by youth and suicide attempts with a firearm are almost always fatal. Furthermore, access to firearms is associated with increased suicide risk.³ For young people ages 10-24, homicide is the third leading cause of death, claiming the lives of about 14 young people each day, while another 1,300 are treated in emergency departments

for nonfatal assault-related injuries.⁴ Firearm injuries represent the majority of school-associated homicides.⁵ Nearly 1,300 children die and 5,790 are treated for gunshot wounds each year.⁶ Additionally, schools shootings are on the rise. Since 2009, at least 177 of America's schools experienced a shooting, leaving more than 100 people dead and over 240 injured.⁷

Overall, firearm-related deaths are the third leading cause of death among U.S. children aged 1 to 17 years,⁶ and disproportionately effect Black youth at a rate 3.7 times as high as that of white youth.⁸

However, firearm suicide rates are highest among American Indian/Alaskan Native and white children and teens.

Youth homicides and nonfatal physical assault-related injuries result in more than \$21 billion annually in combined medical and lost productivity costs alone,⁴ which does not account for costs related to the psychological and social consequences for victims, perpetrators and their families, or costs incurred by communities.

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School Safety, Trauma and Violence

Students exposed to violence experience trauma that can affect their social/emotional development and mental health.⁹ Research has shown that children are particularly vulnerable to trauma because of the impact of stress on their developing brains. Without treatment, repeated childhood exposure to traumatic events can affect the brain and nervous system, and are associated with negative health and well-being outcomes across the life course. In addition to increased health-risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, eating disorders, substance use, and high-risk activities), there is greater likelihood of long-term health problems (e.g., diabetes and heart disease) and early death.⁹

The threat of violence and presence of weapons in schools is also detrimental. Weapons in school can cause students severe short- and long-term social, academic, and psychological harm, even if a weapon is never actively used.¹ Three out of four members of Generation Z report mass shootings as a significant source of stress,¹⁰ nearly as many (72%) say the same about school shootings, or even the possibility of them.

Recommendations

Reducing the impact of weapons and violence on youth requires a multifaceted approach and a combination of evidence-based programs and policies.

Research, Monitoring, and Reporting

Information is one of the greatest ‘weapons’ in the battle against gun violence and data drives the development of effective solutions. Prevention efforts guided by research can reduce the likelihood that firearms will be introduced into communities, and curtail the number of

injuries and deaths to youth.¹¹

- Improve and support systems for collecting accurate and critical data on death, injury, and violence among youth, including exposure to violence, especially in schools
- Remove barriers and restrictions on organizations such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to conduct and monitor firearm violence
- Fund the national violent death reporting system
- Fund gun violence prevention research

Training, Education, and Assessment

This set of recommendations aims to increase the capacity for providing trauma-informed services and mental health supports in schools. Educators are not trained law enforcement officers. These interventions emphasize prevention strategies that ‘arm’ school personnel and security officers with knowledge and skills, instead of weapons – which could further magnify the harmful effects of weapons in school and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.¹

- Mandate, fund, and monitor training that equips school personnel, including school resource officers (SROs), to use trauma-informed responses, mental health supports, and cultural competency
- Embed trauma-informed and mental health interventions into student support services and educator training
- Establish collaborations between law enforcement, school administrators, and mental health and social work clinicians
- Employ threat assessment programs¹² to help schools identify and prevent school violence
- Fund the U.S. Department of Education’s Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program

Youth Engagement and Leadership

Leading experts in the field acknowledge the vital importance of engaging students and survivors in research, implementation, and policy efforts. Programs that include student-driven strategies grant agency to the population that is most impacted by youth violence.

- Include youth in the design and implementation of interventions and peer support programs
- Utilize technology assisted interventions, such as the app ADVOCATOR (a comprehensive school safety framework for high schools that empowers students)

Access to Weapons

Access to firearms results in higher rates of unintentional gun deaths among children, youth suicides, and school shootings. A 2018 national survey conducted by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health¹³ found that just under half of gun owners report safely storing all of their firearms. Child and teen gun deaths are preventable. Child access prevention laws can reduce suicide and unintentional gun deaths and injuries among children and teens.¹⁴ Preventing firearm injury and death should focus on educating students and parents about the dangers of guns and importance of safe storage.¹⁵

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- Promote counseling on access to lethal means; means restriction is one of the few empirically based strategies that substantially reduce suicide deaths.¹⁶
- Prohibit the carrying of concealed weapons on public post-secondary campuses (either by legislation or by higher education system-level policy) – college and university campuses face compounded risks for violence due to drug and alcohol use and mental health issues and suicide risk.¹⁷

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We know that around 22,000 firearm suicide deaths occur every year on average now. And we have been watching this grow over the last 10 years.

Sean Joe

Benjamin E. Youngdahl Professor of Social Development
Washington University in St. Louis

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Conclusion

A substantial body of evidence points to profoundly harmful effects of violence on child development, educational outcomes and the overall well-being of youth. Addressing this public health crisis requires the comprehensive coordination of programs and policy solutions, particularly those focused on preventing violence. Leading scholars, social work and clinical practitioners, policymakers, victims, and advocates are calling for evidence-based policies and practices that can assist with successfully mitigating weapons and violence, increasing student empowerment, and enhancing community safety.

This brief is based in part on *The Impact of Weapons and Violence in Schools: A Congressional Briefing Summary and Resource Guide*, by Nora Simmons, MSW, MPH, National Association of Social Workers.

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The Impact of Weapons and Violence on Schools and Surrounding Communities congressional briefing, held on June 12, 2019, addressed current scientific data surrounding the pressing need to reduce violence in schools and communities. A panel of scholars presented empirical research detailing the impact of violence and weapons on the education and well-being of students, their families, and local communities. A video recording of the briefing is available on the American Educational Research Association's YouTube channel.

Panelists

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Sponsors

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American Educational Research Association

American Psychological Association

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Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy

Grand Challenges for Social Work

National Academy of Education

National Association for Rural Mental Health

National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors

National Association of Social Workers

School Social Work Association of America

Endnotes

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