

What Do the Teachers Want?

Educators' Opinions About Being Armed in the Classroom to Prevent School-Based Gun Violence

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Abstract

On February 14th, 2018, a gunman opened fire on students, faculty, and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. 17 people were killed. This event reignited the gun control debate and, once again, sparked a national discussion about how to best protect our students from gun violence while attending school. The conversation quickly turned to the need for “hardening” our schools by staffing campuses with more armed personnel, including teachers. While hardening targets in this way is not a new approach to securing public spaces, the incident in Parkland sparked a heated debate about whether arming America’s educators is the most effective way of keeping our children safe. However, research supporting the effectiveness of this approach is mixed, and the opinions teachers have about the subject remains largely absent from the discussion at the state and federal policy levels. With this in mind, a survey was conducted with 2926 current and former teachers immediately following the shooting in Parkland. Respondents were overwhelmingly against legislation supporting the arming of teachers in the classrooms. This White Paper presents the findings from this study and provides evidence to support a proactive rather than reactive approach to addressing school-based gun violence.

Introduction

On February 14, 2018, a gunman opened fire on students, faculty, and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Seventeen people were killed. Since this incident, 17 school shootings have occurred in the United States, including a mass shooting at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, where 10 people were killed and 13 were injured. In 2018 alone, 23 school shootings have taken place, the highest number for any year on record.¹

As often happens after a mass shooting, the national conversation and debate around gun control was reignited. Opinions on the issue range from the need to restrict access to guns to the view that increased gun control is an infringement upon one's Second Amendment liberties under the United States Constitution, and everything in between. Despite the range of perspectives on the issue, one thing is evident: reducing gun violence in schools is a complex issue requiring the continued attention of policy makers, researchers and academics, and the general public. Furthermore, each time a school experiences a shooting, the critical need for more empirical data to support evidence-informed decision-making around gun violence prevention strategies in school settings is again made clear. This point is particularly important in regard to proposals to arm teachers in schools as part of a "hardening targets" strategy aimed at preventing active-shooter situations.²

The approach of hardening targets is predicated on the notion that "hardening" schools by arming teachers and other staff would deter an armed individual from entering a campus with the intent to commit mass murder. The assumption underpinning this claim is that a potential shooter is less likely to enter a space where he or she knows they will encounter armed resistance, and that more guns in the hands of "good guys" means fewer shootings or less carnage if a shooter does, in fact, open fire with the intent to kill en masse. This supposition is rooted in the general assertion that "more guns equals less violence".³ Although some research⁴ finds increased gun ownership does decrease violent crime, other studies have found the opposite to be true: high rates of gun ownership are positively correlated with instances of violent crime.⁵ What is evident, however, is that research on the subject is at best, inconclusive, and at worst, often methodologically flawed.⁶

Should We Arm Our Teachers?

With each mass shooting, the polarized nature of the arguments surrounding gun ownership and the Second Amendment arises. As more people publicly call for gun control, those against limiting the rights to gun ownership resort to other arguments, including the possibility of arming teachers to prevent such violence from occurring.⁷ While there is little to no evidence supporting the effectiveness of this approach in reducing gun violence in schools, we also lack an understanding of whether teachers support taking on the role of security in the ways some have suggested they should. Furthermore, it is unknown if educators deem this to be an effective response to the problem at hand. With the exception of anecdotal instances,⁸ the collective voice of educators remains absent from this debate. However, any decision-making on the part of policy makers regarding arming teachers in their classrooms must take into consideration the perspectives educators hold about this issue.

Surveying America's Educators

Immediately following the shooting in Parkland, Florida, a survey of current and former US teachers was conducted to gather the opinions of educators on the issue of arming teachers in their classrooms. The survey was distributed through email, social media, and the list serves and newsletters of several education organizations. 2926 educators from all 50 states and the territory of Guam participated in the survey. Findings suggest that the majority of participants do not favor legislation supporting arming of teachers in their classrooms as a strategy for reducing school-based gun violence.

The Issue

School Shootings in the U.S.

School shootings in the United States have steadily increased since the 1999 Columbine shooting where 13 high school students were shot and killed by two of their armed peers.⁹ Since this incident, an average of 10 school shootings have taken place every year.¹⁰ As of October 2018, 17 reported school shootings have occurred, making 2018 the worst year on record for gun violence in schools.¹¹ Since the incident at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, attention to the issue of gun control has continued to increase, with researchers, students, parents, and activists calling for policy change and stricter gun control laws.¹² President Donald Trump and other policy makers, however, have responded with an alternative solution: hardening targets by arming teachers in their classrooms.¹³

Harden the Targets

“Hardening targets,” or increasing the amount of on-site law enforcement, school resource officers (SROs), or armed guardians at “soft targets” like schools, is not a new concept. In fact, it is often one of the more commonly proposed solutions to decreasing violence in schools, and is a solution predicated on the notion that a larger law enforcement presence

will lower incidents of violent acts committed on school campuses.¹⁴ While arming teachers has not historically been the preferred method for strengthening security in schools, the increase in school shootings in recent years has brought this potential solution into focus. However, there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of this approach. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it is unclear whether educators are in favor of being armed while on the job as their voices have been largely absent from the debate.

As mass shootings in schools have steadily increased over the last two decades, so has the perception of the need for increased security in schools. As more people are affected, administrators and policymakers continue to debate the most effective means to prevent mass shootings.¹⁵ In the context of schools, teachers and other school administrators are often first responders in a shooting incident. As such, many policymakers posit that arming school staff (teachers and others) may be the most effective way to prevent a shooting or stop one that has already begun.¹⁶

The use of armed security in schools (SROs), the installation of metal detectors, and crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) as means for hardening targets have been in place for quite some time.¹⁷ The effectiveness of these approaches, however, is inconclusive. While some studies find that the presence of law enforcement or SROs makes students feel safer,¹⁸ many conclude that the correlation between SROs and school violence is mixed.¹⁹ Further, a positive correlation between serious school violence and the presence of SROs on campus has been observed.²⁰ There is also little evidence to support the claim that increased security in the form of armed personnel would, in fact, decrease the likelihood of future school shootings. Nevertheless, policy makers continue to advocate for this approach.²¹

Arming Teachers

A Gallup poll surveying 450 educators in March 2018 indicated that teachers generally do not favor being armed in the classroom. Seventy-three percent of those who participated in the poll oppose school staff being armed with guns in schools. Of those surveyed, 58 percent believe that having teachers and staff carry guns would decrease safety in schools overall. Only 18 percent indicated a willingness to carry a gun at school.²² Beyond the Gallup survey results, little is known about how teachers feel about being armed in their classrooms. Anecdotal accounts of teachers' opinions regarding the issue proliferated after the incident in Parkland, yet there remains little empirical research on the subject. Although some of these accounts indicated support for arming teachers, it appeared that the majority did not favor this approach. Regardless, and despite the lack of empirical evidence to support the hardening target strategy more generally, federal and state-level policy makers have continued to champion a strategy of arming school staff to prevent future school-based gun violence.²³

Responding with Legislation

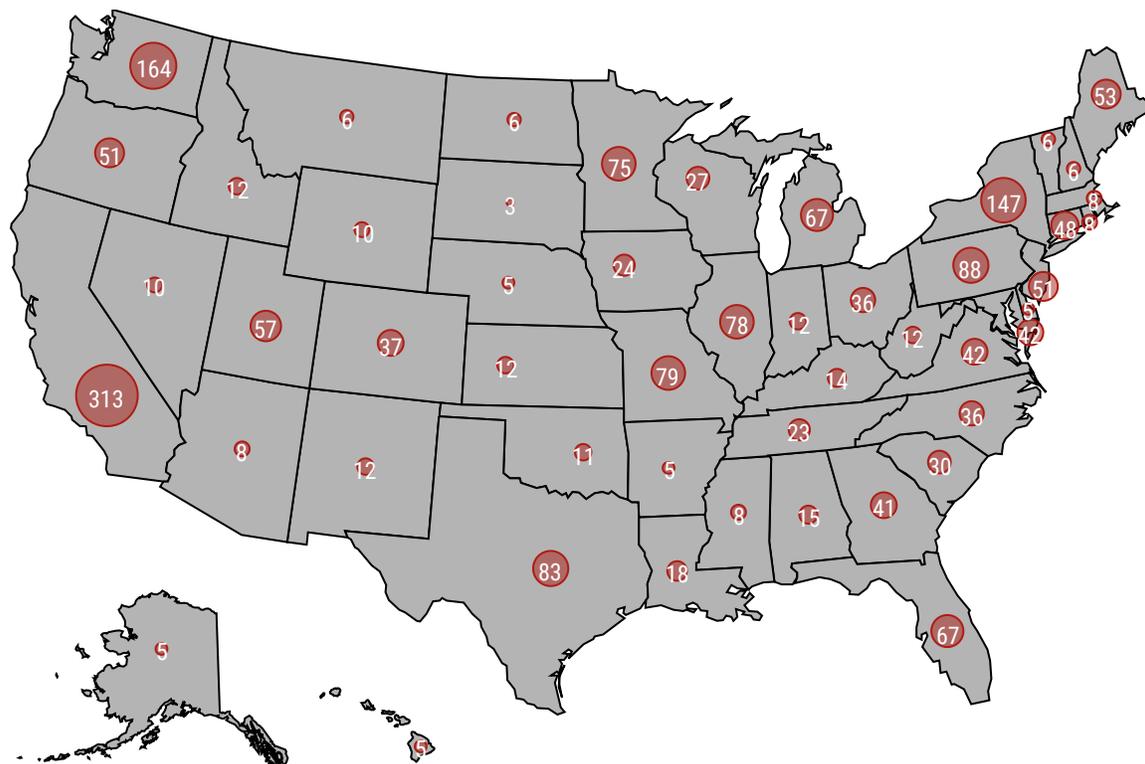
In the wake of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, 14 states introduced a total of 25 measures to arm teachers and staff in schools.²⁴ In Florida, the state legislature

passed SB 7026, also known as the Marshal Bill. This legislation appropriates \$400,000,000 to combat school-based gun violence, some of which is earmarked for school guardian programs that may include arming teachers and other school staff members. However well-intentioned, the Marshal Bill and others fail to consider the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of target hardening, and they do not represent the overwhelming opposition to the approach by teachers.²⁵

What Do the Teachers Want?

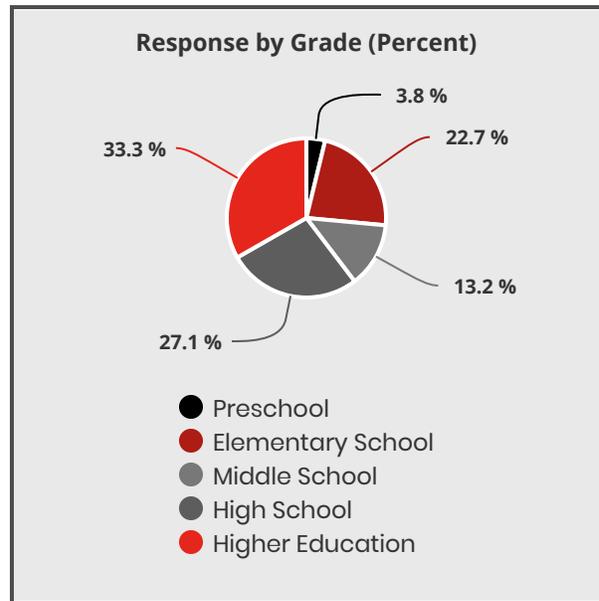
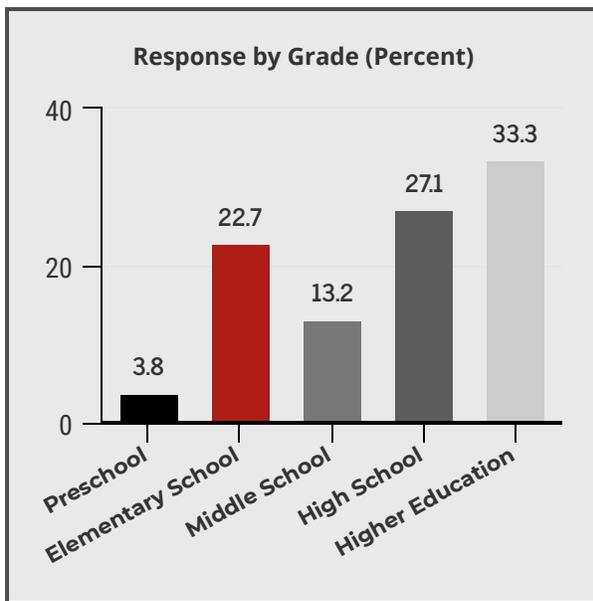
In an effort to more systematically infuse the voices of teachers into this debate, educators from preschool through higher education throughout the United States were surveyed immediately following the shooting in Parkland regarding their opinions about being armed in the classroom. 2926 current and former teachers participated in the survey. Responses were distributed across all four of the main regions of the United States, with representation being slightly higher in the western region (34 percent). All 50 states and the US Territory of Guam were represented in the data. The states with the most respondents were California (11.4 percent), Washington (5.9 percent), New York (5.3 percent), Ohio (4.6 percent), and Pennsylvania (3.2 percent). The sample was overwhelmingly female, reflecting the overall teacher population, which is disproportionately made up of women.²⁶ High school teachers and professors in higher education settings made up approximately 60 percent of the responses and almost half of the preschool through high school teachers identified their school as being located in a suburban area. Only 16 percent of the respondents reported owning a gun and 25 percent indicated having more than minimal experience using a firearm.

Response by State



Being Armed in the Classroom

The teachers surveyed were overwhelmingly against allowing educators to be armed in the classroom. This finding held true when examined by grade, with the majority of the respondents indicating a negative opinion. When examined by region, no significant difference in the responses emerged. Of the teachers who were gun owners (16.1%), only 11.5 percent believed being armed while teaching should be part of teachers' responsibilities. Overall, the overwhelming majority (95.3%) do not believe teachers should bear the responsibility of protecting students by carrying a gun in the classroom. Furthermore, only 6.1 percent of participants indicated being comfortable using a gun to stop an active shooter. The percentage of respondents who indicated a willingness to use a gun in an active-shooter situation was only slightly higher at 10.4 percent.



When asked about the effectiveness of arming teachers as a means to prevent school-based gun violence, the majority of those sampled did not believe doing so would prevent someone from entering a school with the intent to commit harm. Furthermore, the approach is not viewed as an effective means of thwarting a shooting already taking place. Conversely, the majority of the participants believed that arming teachers would lead to unintended violence in schools, including mistakenly firing a gun during an active shooter drill. Consistent with the Gallup Poll conducted in March 2018 following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, 64% believed overall school safety would be compromised if teachers were allowed to carry firearms in the classroom.

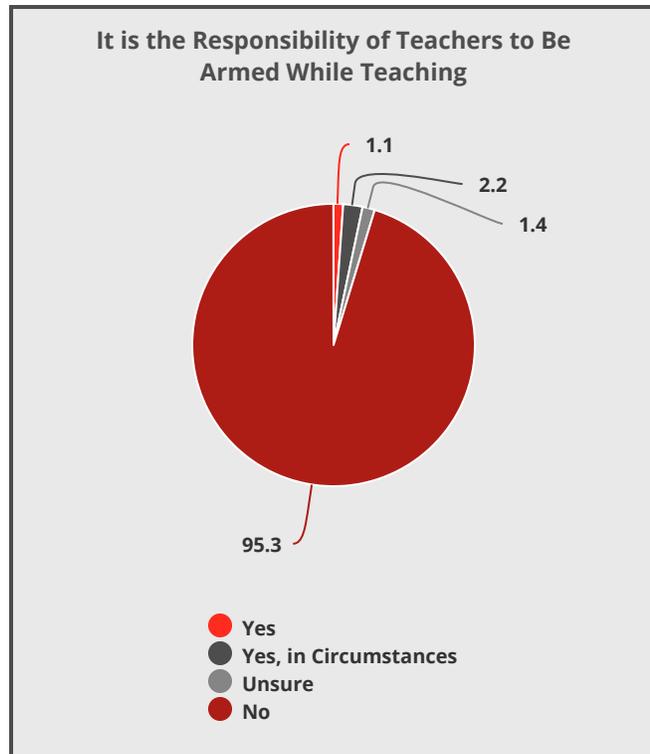
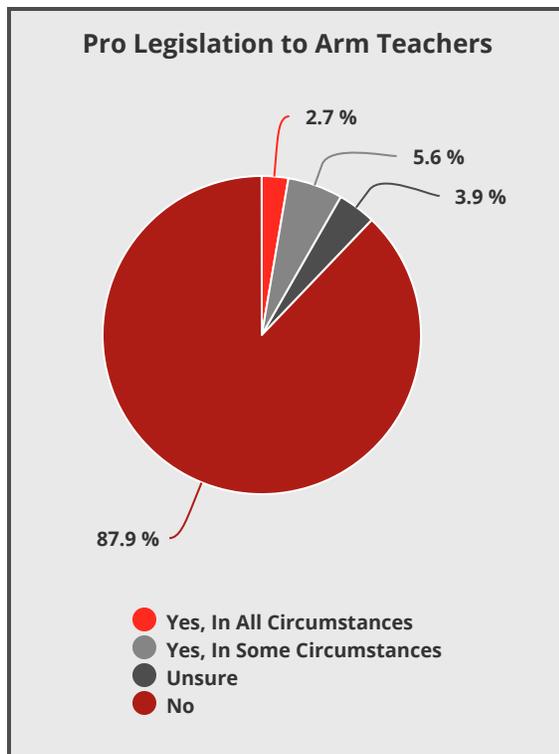
Much of the current legislation surrounding this issue includes funding for training teachers and other school staff to become competent shooters. As such, participants were asked to indicate their interest in becoming trained to use a gun in an active-shooter circumstance, as well as their opinions regarding the possibility of becoming trained to diffuse violence in this way. Only 11.1 percent expressed an interest in receiving such training. An even lower percentage (7.9%) believed marksman training would provide them with adequate preparation for successfully handling a school-based active-shooter situation.

Legislation Allowing Teachers to be Armed in the Classroom

The teachers surveyed were overwhelmingly against any legislation designed to support arming teachers (88%). This result held constant when individual experience with guns, gun ownership, and one's perspective on gun ownership were assessed. Although those with greater experience shooting guns were more likely to be in favor of having guns in the classroom, less than one third of the respondents who indicated having a lot of experience with shooting were in favor of this type of legislation. Not surprisingly, those with minimal to no shooting experience were the most unsupportive, with 89.7 and 96.2 percent respectively demonstrating a less than favorable opinion about laws allowing educators to have guns while teaching.

“*I think that arming a bunch of people without the training or desire to shoot guns is a disaster-in-the-making. I worry about students getting their hands on guns, and I worry far more about gun accidents than about school shootings*”
 -Study Participant

Owning a gun and espousing a positive opinion regarding private-citizen gun ownership did positively affect the views participants held regarding this issue. Still, only 30 percent of those who identified as gun owners were in favor of legislation to arm teachers in all or some circumstances. Moreover, of those strongly in favor of private citizen gun ownership, almost all indicated being against any legislation to provide teachers with guns as a means to protect students.



What Should Be Done?

Overall, teachers do not favor being armed in their classrooms as a solution to the issue of school-based gun violence. Yet this approach is still being put forth as a viable tactic for combating the issue of gun violence in schools. While it is unclear exactly how many pieces of state legislation proposing to arm teachers and other school staff are currently pending, as recently as August 2018, federal initiatives to allow states greater access to funds to support such efforts were being considered.²⁷ Communities continue to experience mass shootings and the current administration contends that the solution to the problem is to increase armed security in public spaces and to encourage people to carry concealed weapons in order to thwart a shooting once it has begun.²⁸ However, as the research indicates, neither approach has proven effective in reducing gun violence in schools or other public spaces where people gather.

The issue at hand is undoubtedly complex and difficult to solve. However, as many researchers have concluded, the solution does not lie in the hardening of targets. Rather, a multifaceted, public-health approach is necessary to mitigate this issue.²⁹ Although this may include hardening targets in the form of greater physical security and armed personnel, this response alone is insufficient.

Increased security and concealed carrying fail to address the root of the issue, since the problem often starts long before someone enters a school with the intent to commit an act of violence.³⁰ Rather than adhering to a strategy of reactivity, as is often suggested by policy makers, researchers and education organizations agree that a comprehensive, three-pronged approach focused on prevention is necessary. A strategy of this kind should consist of universal approaches to promoting safety and well-being, risk reduction and the promotion of protective factors for people experiencing difficulty, and intervention where violent behavior is present or seems likely.³¹ This multi-tiered approach includes, but is not limited to, the creation of emotionally safe schools where children are protected from all forms of verbal, emotional, and physical violence; an increased focus on mental health, including adequately staffing schools with mental health professionals who are equipped to assist students experiencing mental health challenges and provide support to their families; a reduction in exclusionary practices of school discipline; an increased focus on creating and maintaining multi-disciplinary threat assessment teams in schools and communities; and a reduction of access to firearms, including a ban on assault-style weapons.³²

Additionally, the implications of the Dickey Amendment—an amendment passed by Congress in 1996 prohibiting the Centers for Disease Control from funding injury prevention and control research advocating for or promoting gun control—must be addressed. Funding for research that approaches gun violence as a public health issue was greatly reduced as a result of this amendment.³³ As such, the mortality and morbidity rates associated with gun violence in America far exceed the amount of funding dedicated to understanding the problem and

developing evidence-informed solutions.³⁴ Further, failing to consider gun violence an issue of public health has led to a dearth of research in this area compared with other leading causes of death in the United States.³⁵ As such, there remains a lack of critical information on how to address the problem at its root, and we are left to rely on flawed reactionary approaches that fail to alleviate the problem.

“*Every classroom conflict can become lethal, which surely has deleterious effects on learning. Arming teachers creates an absurd power imbalance that also impedes student-centered learning. And it might discourage otherwise effective teachers from pursuing the profession.*”

-Study Participant

Conclusion

Despite a national outcry to address the issue of gun violence, mass shootings in schools and other public spaces continue to plague our communities. Although greater security in the form of hardened targets can be part of the solution, arming teachers with guns to protect their students while they are learning is not the preferred solution, nor has it proven effective. Greater security may help to discourage a shooter from entering a building with the intent to kill, and increased armed personnel may reduce the amount of carnage once a shooting has begun. However, the overall effectiveness of these solutions remains unsubstantiated. We must therefore move away from an approach rooted in reactionary solutions to one that centers on a multi-faceted, public health strategy aimed at prevention.

As legislation that includes provisions for arming teachers and staff in schools continues to be put forth, the perspectives of educators need to be accounted for. It is evident that teachers do not want to double as security in their classrooms. Instead, they favor an approach rooted in comprehensive prevention. As one teacher remarked, “we need to do much more to dismantle the culture of gun violence that pervades our society. Schools are stressful environments, and create stress among students, teachers, etc. We have a culture that says that we can solve our problems by using guns. When those two factors mix, we have what we have seen far too often: people using guns to deal with their stress.” To support an approach of reactivity ignores the perspectives teachers hold on this issue and sidelines them in decision-making processes.

Rather, we need to listen to their experiences and utilize their expertise to help shape comprehensive prevention programs focused on addressing issues of mental health, building relationships with students, instituting restorative approaches to discipline, and providing greater overall support for children and families. Failing to do so not only supports a reactionary strategy that will never address the root of the problem, but means that our children will continue to pay for this approach with their lives.

“ One of my goals as a teacher is to be authoritative but not authoritarian, to encourage a kind of equality in the classroom. If I had to have a gun, all of that would go out the window. My own fears about...the burden of having to have a gun would distract me from teaching and listening to the students. And they would see me as the person with the gun rather than as their teacher.

-Study Participant

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Notes

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