Firearm Possession in Schools: Disarming the Myths

Michael J. Furlong  
University of California  
Santa Barbara

Carley S. Flam  
University of California  
Santa Barbara

Annette Smith  
University of California  
Santa Barbara

Abstract: There is no single image that symbolizes the public’s preoccupation with school violence more than that of youths bringing guns to school. This behavior so deeply violates fundamental school safety values that it is the focus of State and National legislation. Even the Supreme Court recently ruled on the constitutionality of the Federal Gun-Free School Act. This paper reviews empirical studies that shed light on the presence and impact of firearms on school campuses focusing on national and California findings. Given understandable concern about school safety, one would presume that there is a body of empirical information that documents the presence of firearms on school campuses. In fact, it is shown that information is incomplete, at best, but what is known suggests that gun possession is not as prevalent as is generally presumed. Studies profiling youth who report carrying guns are reviewed; they show that gun possession can be interpreted by school psychologists as one aspect of a constellation of significant risk factors in a youth’s life that are commonly addressed by school psychologists.

Susan Allen had seen Sam Marino literally backing Nicholas into a corner of the classroom; she heard Marino insist that Nicholas hand over the gun. Then she saw Marino’s body jump. She saw the books and folders he was carrying fly in all directions. She heard Marino cry, “My God, my God,” and she watched as he fell forward.

And now this boy—this gangly child with the sweet smile and serious demeanor, a student in her algebra class—had just turned toward her and pointed his gun at her, saying, “Now you.”

— from Lethal Passage, Erik Larson (1994, p. 116)

The passage above could be the chilling start of a fictional account of youth violence, but it is actually the tragic end of a real life situation in which a student used a Cobray M-10 (a semiautomatic, large handgun with a 32-bullet clip) to settle a dispute with a school bully. Although Nicholas attended a private school in Virginia, similar stories have been played out too frequently across the country. Soon to be released reports from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Patrick Cachur, personal communication, June 13, 1995) indicate that for the two-year period July, 1992 through June, 1994 there were at least 105 firearm deaths recorded in the newsprint media that occurred at school or on the way to or from school (they could have taken place before or after school hours). Most of these were homicides (85), but there were also a number of suicides (20). More than three fourths of these cases involved the death of a youth under the age of 20. A similar study, conducted by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence (1990) in the late 1980s, found that during a five-year period, 71 individuals (65 students and 6 staff) were murdered and 201 individuals were wounded by gunfire on school campuses. A comparison of the number of homicides reported in these two studies suggests that firearm related deaths on school campuses are increasing, although the lack of consistent data gathering approaches precludes a definitive statement being made about this trend.

California has certainly experienced the impact of firearm-related deaths on school campuses—from Patrick Purdy’s killing of five students at Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton (Reinhold, 1989), to the death of Demetrius Rice at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles (Dunn, 1993), and to the shooting death of a principal at Sacred Hearts High School (Redlands) and subsequent suicide by the student assailant (Gorman, 1995). Reflecting on these incidents of violence on school campuses, the general public now

About the Authors: Michael Furlong, PhD, is an associate professor in the Counseling/Clinical/School Psychology program at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Carley Flam and Annette Smith are doctoral students in the CCSP program. Correspondence about this paper should be sent to UCSB, Graduate School of Education, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490; email: mfurlong@edstar.gse.ucsb.edu. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual convention of the California Association of School Psychologists, San Francisco, March, 1995.
considers violence and discipline to be the biggest challenge facing public schools (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994). This national trend is also seen in coverage of school violence by news media in California. For example, under the key word “school violence” there were 76 articles published in the Los Angeles Times between 1990 and 1995; this compares with only 14 articles published between 1982 and 1989 (Melvyl System Data Bases, 1993).

Although there is little debate about the dire consequences that can occur when students or others bring firearms to schools, there is surprisingly little information about the prevalence of guns on school campuses. In one related article, Berkowitz (1994) provides an excellent general discussion of the impact firearms have on youth, yet he includes only a brief review of what is known about the presence and impact of guns on school campuses. This paper is the first comprehensive review of research about the presence of guns on school campuses. Given concern about the danger created by guns on school campuses, school psychologists should be knowledgeable of research related to student gun possession as it relates to general involvement in school safety planning efforts and to individual students they serve (Furlong, Babinski, Poland, Muñoz, & Boles, 1996; Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1994). The purpose of this paper is to focus the discussion of youth gun possession as it relates specifically to schools. To this end, we review (a) cautions about gun possession studies, (b) national and regional studies that have examined gun possession at school, (c) information about gun possession in California schools and guns general impact on youth, and (d) what is generally known about youth who own and/or report carrying guns. We close with a discussion of issues to consider when addressing the reality of guns on campuses and to dispel the many myths that have arisen about them.

SOME CAUTIONS ABOUT STUDENT GUN POSSESSION STUDIES

Various sources have suggested that upwards of 270,000 guns are brought to school each day by students across America (American Psychological Association, 1993). The source of these estimates, unfortunately, is not readily apparent, and even when studies are cited their results are clouded by methodological issues that are often overlooked in the rush to convince policy makers that something needs to be done about the threat guns pose for schools. The simple fact is that there are no national or California data bases that systematically track firearm possession by students, or staff for that matter. Consequently, student gun possession rates are estimated from various student self-report survey studies. However, cross-validation of studies is problematic due to differences in methodologies and the precision with which the term “weapons” has been defined. Some studies have asked about student “weapon” possession and included “guns,” “knives,” and “clubs” in this category (e.g., Fingerhut, Ingram, & Feldman, 1992a, 1992b). In addition, there is no consensus about which time referent should be used when asking students if they carry guns to schools, and if they do how frequently. Thus, some studies have asked about gun carrying in the “past month,” the “past year,” “this school year,” or “over the last 12 months.” How these different time referents affect observed gun carrying rates is unknown, but it is likely they are affected by memory telescoping and/or decay effects (see Eisenhower, Mathiowetz, & Morganstein, 1991). With these caveats in mind, we have compiled information specifically about student gun possession on school campuses.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL STUDIES OF STUDENT GUN POSSESSION

The most extensive study to date of student gun possession is the National Adolescent Health Survey (American School Health Association, 1989). The results of this study showed a low level of self-reported gun possession by a national sample of secondary school students, with 98.3% indicating they had NOT carried a gun to school in the “last 12 months.” Boys (2.6%) were more likely than females (0.7%) to carry firearms. In one of the few instances when the same exact question was asked with another sample, Kingery, Mirazee, Pruitt, and Hurley (1990) found higher rates of gun possession (8.9%) in a sample of students from schools in rural Texas—among the highest rates of school gun possession of any study published to date.

One of the few studies to carefully examine grade level differences in gun possession (Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1993) used the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991) to examine gun possession among Washington state’s
pupils. It was found that general weapon possession (including knives, guns, and other objects during the "past 30 days") increased from sixth to eighth graders, but was stable thereafter. As found in most studies of general student weapon possession, guns constituted only a small proportion of the weapons students say they bring to school. In this instance, 5.1% (sixth graders) to 8.5% (eighth graders) of the pupils said they had brought a gun (handgun, rifle/shotgun) to school in the preceding month, with between 4.0% to 5.8% of eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders bringing a "handgun." A similar rate of handgun possession was found in a recent study (4%, Harris, 1993), however, in this instance the time referent was "this school year."

Other studies have examined campus gun possession using regional samples (Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 1991; Sheley, McGee, & Wright, 1992) and also found that between 3% to 6% of secondary school students indicate they have carried a gun to school. Across all studies, Sheley et al. (1992) report the highest rate of 9% for a multi-city sample of urban male students. In addition, a recent survey of about 200,000 youths (PRIDE, 1995) revealed that 4.3% of sixth to eighth graders and 7.4% of ninth to twelfth graders said they had "ever" carried a gun to school. Of interest is that long-term gun possession rates are similar to short-term rates. It appears likely that guns are most frequently brought to schools by a relatively small group of students. These same students also are more likely to carry guns in other community settings. Given this pattern, gun possession at school can be usefully understood as part of a more general involvement in a subcultural of delinquent and violent behavior (see Felson, Liska, South, & McNulty, 1994). This matter is addressed in more depth in the gun possession profile presented later in the paper.

Finally, other studies have examined student self-reports of the possession of other weapons at school (e.g., Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Harris, 1993; Kingery, Pruitt, & Hurley, 1992; Turner, 1989). These studies consistently show that students report carrying other weapons to school at higher rates than guns, with knives being the most common weapon on school campuses. In addition, in one of the few studies that explicitly asked about gun possession at school and in the community, Sheley et al. (1992) found that inner-city boys were nearly four times more likely to report carrying a gun in the community (35%) than at school (9%)—girls had the same pattern (11% community vs. 3% school).

**CALIFORNIA YOUTH AND GUN POSSESSION**

Given the concern expressed by California politicians and policy makers about the problems posed by guns on school campuses, it is surprising that we have a very poor understanding of how many guns may actually be present each day on California's school campuses. It has been well documented, however, that many of California's children are being shot and killed with guns.

Using information from death certificates, we know that firearm injuries posed a significant threat to California's youth during the 1980-1989 time period with 5,717 officially recorded deaths of youths under the age of 21 involving the use of a firearm (an average of about 10 per week). Nearly two thirds of these deaths (3,741) were homicides, about one fourth (1,490) were suicides, and about one tenth (486) were unintentional (California Department of Health Services, 1992). Interestingly, official death reports from the California Department of Health Services (1992) indicate that the level of homicide and gun-related deaths are not increasing compared with the recent past. For example, the homicide rate among youth during 1980-1982 was actually higher than during 1987-1989, 7.8 per 100,000 versus 7.3 per 100,000. All geographic areas of California showed decreases of homicide rates over these two time periods. To put the homicide rates for California's youth into perspective, the overall homicide rates for Canada and Japan are just 2.9 and 0.9 per 100,000, respectively (Fingerhut et al., 1992a). Similarly, in California for suicides, many of which involve the use of guns, the rate declined from 3.4 per 100,000 to 3.2 per 100,000 (the California Department of Health Services, 1992).

The homicide victim figures cited above are taken from official ICD-9 codes written on death certificates. In comparison, data from the Uniform Crime Reports (U.S. Department of Justice, 1992) shows a 79% increase in youths committing homicides during the 1980s. Other reports show that Los Angeles County's youth homicide rate is second nationally only to Washington DC (Fingerhut, Ingram, & Feldman, 1992b). Whether the overall homicide rate or the firearm-related homicide rate is rising, firearm injuries and homicides are high and pose a significant health problem for California's youth (Dear et al., 1995). Importantly, however, when one considers the total number of homicides involving youth in California each year, only a tiny fraction of them occur on school
It has been argued, in fact, that schools are still the safest public setting for our youth (Furlong & Morrison, in press).

Although no centralized data base currently exists to track firearm possession in California’s schools, there are three sources of information that provide at least a preliminary glance into how often guns are brought to school campuses: (a) data collected as part of the Standard School Crime Report process during 1985 to 1990, (b) data from two regional administrations of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991), and (c) data that we have collected in several administrations of the California School Climate and Safety Survey (Furlong & Morrison, in press).

**California School Crime Reports**

During the later part of the 1980s, schools in California were required to record and report to the California Department of Education every “crime” that occurred on campus. Included in the list of school crimes was possession of a firearm. The last year for which data were compiled and reported (1989-90), schools in California officially reported confiscating 1,131 guns from students. This represented a 225% increase from the first year for which data were collected (1985-86), but still amounted to approximately just one gun per school district per year. In addition, when these gun possessions are expressed as rate per 1,000 students in each of California’s 58 counties, some unexpected patterns are found (see Figure 1). The schools that caught and reported students who brought firearms to school at the highest rates were located mostly outside of major urban areas. There were only a few counties, mostly small mountainous rural counties, that had zero confiscations for the year. In addition, when these gun possessions are expressed as rate per 1,000 students in each of California’s 58 counties, some unexpected patterns are found (see Figure 1). The schools that caught and reported students who brought firearms to school at the highest rates were located mostly outside of major urban areas. There were only a few counties, mostly small mountainous rural counties, that had zero confiscations for the year. Although official school crime report data do not support the conclusion that California’s schools are “armed and dangerous,” they most likely underestimate true gun possession rates (Butte County Office of Education, 1995). In addition, it is impossible to determine if those counties with the highest rates actually have higher true rates of student gun possession. Other factors could explain this outcome such as school administrators in those counties being more willing to make reports and students being less sophisticated in concealing guns, among other possibilities. Starting with the 1995-96 school year, California’s schools are again required to police and report school “crimes,” including gun possession. With the widespread implementation of the “zero tolerance” policy it can be anticipated that gun possession rates will increase. Additional research is needed, however, to determine if this will be due to true changes in gun possession rates or increased surveillance and reporting practices.

**Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey**

A second empirical source of information about gun possession on California campuses comes from data reported as part of the nationwide Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991). The YRBSS was administered to samples of high school students from San Diego and San Francisco as part of the effort to track progress toward meeting the Healthy America 2000 goals. The question asked in this survey was about weapon possession on and off campus—“weapons” included guns as well as knives and clubs. Thus, the weapon possession rates found in this study were much higher than is generally found for gun or weapon possession specifically at school. Nonetheless, this is the only study in which weapon possession self-reports of Californian adolescents can be compared with their peers across the nation. As shown in Figure 2, 30-day weapon possession among these two samples of California’s high school students was equivalent to or lower than the national average. About 30% of the California male students and 10% of the female students reported carrying a “weapon” anywhere in the last 30 days. High school students from the San Diego area had a lower school weapon (including gun, knife, and club) possession rate (11.1%) than 5 out of 9 other metropolitan areas sampled across the country. San Diego also had one of the lowest rates of students reporting that they had been threatened at school in the preceding 30 days by someone using a weapon (9.8%). This pattern was replicated in the 1993 YRBSS (Kann et al., 1995).

**California School Climate and Safety Survey**

A third source of information about the presence of guns on California’s campuses comes from safety surveys conducted through the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools—University of California at Santa Barbara School Climate and Safety Partnership. The California School Climate and Safety Survey, originally developed as a needs assessment tool for the California Department of Education’s school safety
planning guide (California Department of Education, 1989) has been completed by more than 10,000 students attending California schools (Furlong, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1995; Furlong, Bates, Chung, & Morrison, 1995; Furlong & Morrison, in press). In this questionnaire, students are not asked if they personally brought a gun to school, but if they have seen a gun on campus or been threatened by someone with a gun on campus during the past 30 days. In one sample of 6,189 students in grades 5-12 attending schools in suburban communities, 9.8% reported that they had seen a gun on their school campus during the previous 30 days. In another sample of 1,672 seventh graders from urban schools, 11.7% reported seeing a gun on their campuses, but this was during the previous school year. In addition, 5.4% of the suburban students and 6.9% of the urban students in the same samples reported that they had personally been threatened at school by someone using a gun. They also reported having seen the gun. Although these data do not precisely measure student gun possession rates, they suggest that about 1 in 10 report seeing a gun on campus in a typical month and about 1 in 20 report being threatened by someone using a gun. Interestingly, Furlong et al. (1995) also found that approximately 5% of the teachers in the suburban schools reported that they had seen a gun on campus during the same 30-day period.

Interviews with district personnel revealed that no guns had been confiscated on these same schools and no staff member had reported seeing a gun. Thus, these findings need replication before definitive conclusions about gun presence on school campuses in California can be drawn.

In summary, there is relatively little known about actual gun possession rates on California school campuses. The best information available is generally comparable to or better than findings from samples taken in other parts of the country. There is no reason at this time to suspect that, across all schools, guns are more prevalent on California campuses than those of the rest of the nation.

Figure 1
Rates per 1000 students of firearms confiscated on school campuses by California County. Data from the Standard California School Crime Report 1989-90, California Department of Education, Sacramento, CA.
WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT YOUTH WHO REPORT CARRYING GUNS?

School psychologists who are knowledgeable about gun possession data are a valuable resource to dispel myths when events heighten staff, student, or parent concerns about guns on campus. When school communities become concerned about guns on their campuses, school psychologists can bring to the ensuing discussion information about strategies for dealing with guns on campus. They can also provide information about the characteristics of youth who report owning or carrying guns. This is a crucial role for school psychologists because they can formulate an understanding of gun possession as part of a broader, risk-ridden developmental process. Although it is understandable that the implementation of a “zero tolerance” policy about school gun possession is designed to make the school safer for all youths, it has also taken on a primary punitive function, one that is not in keeping with the developmentally enhancing strategies often proposed by school psychologists (Brendtro & Ness, 1995). As with most life problems, research shows that the act of carrying a gun to school is often not an isolated event. Even if schools elect to unquestioningly expel students who bring guns to schools without question, it is clear that students who do carry guns to schools, or in other settings, often have multiple risk factors in their lives (whether they are caught or not).

In one school-based study of urban (Seattle, Washington) high school students, Callahan and Rivara (1992) found that 6.4% of the males said that they owned a handgun. Handguns were perceived to be more easily accessible by and were most commonly owned by adolescents in the lowest social class. They found that 46% of the teenage handgun owners (which was 4% of all eleventh graders, and 6.6% of the male students surveyed) had “at some time” carried a gun to school. The availability of handguns (in terms of perceived easy access or actual ownership) was more common among students who reported behavior problems, particularly gang membership, selling drugs, interpersonal violence (such as robbery), assault and battery, striking a teacher, conviction for crimes, and either suspension or expulsion from school.

The strongest association between handguns and other behaviors found by Callahan and Rivara (1992) was that the students who owned handguns also were more likely, to self-report deviant behaviors (such as selling drugs, and assault and battery), and were more likely to have been expelled or suspended from school. This study found that easy access to handguns was highest among African-American male students. For students who self-report involvement in deviant behavior, fewer females than males reported that they owned a gun. Nearly 4 out of 5 of the male handgun owners reported involvement in some other deviant, antisocial behaviors. Other studies also found weapon carrying, in general, among youths to be highly correlated with serious high risk behaviors, such as having been arrested for or involved in robbery and/or assaultive behavior. Therefore, gun ownership and carrying is more accurately understood to be part of an extremely aggressive, rather than defensive, system of
Possession of any weapon on campus is dangerous, however, it is erroneous to presume that all weapons, including guns, are brought to school because of concerns about safety. Using data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, School Supplement, Bastian and Taylor (1991) report that only 3% of males and 1% of females report EVER bringing a gun to school. The important caveat here is that their question specified that the weapon was brought for the student’s protection. From the limited available information, it appears that students bring weapons to campus for a variety of reasons, not only because they fear violence.

Examining the breadth of reasons students bring guns to school, a study by Sheley et al. (1992), analyzed personal characteristics and the violence-related experiences of youth. They found a greater association between gun possession with outside-school factors than in-school factors. Being male, coming from a large family in which adult males carry guns, associating with gun-carrying youth, and involvement with use of or selling drugs were positively associated with gun-related violence. Other studies indicate that males are more likely than females to carry guns to school (American School Health Association, 1989; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991; Dana, 1992; Kingery et al., 1990), and that Hispanic and Black students are more likely to bring a gun to school than white males (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991), but this is not a strong association.

Another study found that gun possession is not exclusively associated with obvious antisocial, delinquent behavior. McCreary Centre Society (1993) examined health and safety related experiences among a sample of youth in British Columbia and found that students who reported carrying a gun at school, or anywhere else, in the past month 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. These same students were twice as likely to report that they had been physically abused, had skipped school and that they did not like school (self-reported school dropouts indicated that they owned a gun at a rate 3 times that of school persisters; Berkowitz, 1994). Also, students who had been in a physical fight in the past month were four times more likely than non-fighters (32%, compared to 8%) to report that they had carried a gun to school in the previous month. Social contributors were also identified by Webster et al. (1993) who found that there is an association between gun carrying and the number of victims of violence that the youth knows, independent of peer support for violence. This suggests that gun carrying is in part determined by a youth’s social network and its support of violence.

SUMMARY

The standard established by Educate America Goal Seven is that all schools should be free of violence by the year 2000 (National Education Goals Panel, 1994). This stringent standard dictates that schools should be completely free of guns and other weapons. With five years to go toward this goal, there is limited understanding of how many firearms are on the nation’s or California’s school campuses each day. This review suggests that (a) guns are not as widespread as policy makers believe; (b) youth report that they are much more likely to carry guns in other community locations than schools; (c) it is likely that guns are most often brought to school by a small group of youth for whom gun possession is part of broader high-risk life factors in their lives; and (d) school is the safest public setting when the frequency of actual shootings is used as the criterion to judge safety.

Several risk factors appear to be associated specifically with gun possession at school. These risk factors include: (a) behavior problems (participation in high risk behaviors), (b) being male, (c) association or affiliation with peer groups and family members whose attitudes and values support violence, (d) low socioeconomic status, and (e) poor school and academic status. In addition to ecological factors associated with gun possession, Kingery et al. (1990) found that students who carried firearms in the rural Texas schools they surveyed, had developed maladaptive ways of coping and responding to aggressors. They were predisposed to threaten to use a weapon, tended to act “tough,” and more frequently joined a gang for protection. However, it is important to recognize that more than 90% of the youths surveyed in this rural sample, and in all other studies reviewed, report that they do not carry weapons or guns, nor do they perceive them to be a viable tool with which to solve personal conflicts.

Although many of the studies reviewed focused on individual correlates of gun and general weapon possession, strong associations have also been
found in 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. Exceptional rates of crime, gun activity, and violence appear to characterize the social conditions for many youths who report that they themselves carry guns (Sheley et al., 1992). Given these findings, it is clear that gun possession should be perceived within the larger ecological context. Gun possession among youth is a function of their involvement in a coercive developmental process that is embedded within an antisocial “gun culture”—a value system that accepts gun violence as a legitimate problem solving strategy. Although it is not the school psychologists’s 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 to take action. Of course, issues surrounding the impacts of guns and other weapons should be incorporated into various violence reduction programs that school psychologists can offer at school.

Intervention efforts will be most effective when they fit the individual’s developmental needs, deficits, and strengths. For example, a zero tolerance approach may be effective and appropriate for a 15 year-old adolescent who is embedded in a gun culture and brings a gun to school as an aggressive act against others. However, this same expulsion policy may be inappropriate, and is likely to cause harm, if it is used to punish a first grader who out of curiosity found his father’s gun and brought it to school (e.g., Pyle, 1995). Clearly, the schools response to such events must fit the context in order to have effective, rather than potentially detrimental, outcomes for the youth involved.

Policies and approaches that have been implemented to address the issue of gun possession on school campuses, such as zero tolerance, reflect a limited understanding of the contextual factors that contribute to and may even create such antisocial behaviors in youth. Rather than simply catching youth being “bad,” there is a need to understand the behavior of gun carrying in the larger ecological context. One model that is helpful in understanding the processes that are involved in the development of antisocial behaviors, such as weapons possession, is Patterson’s coercion model (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). The coercion model suggests that the learning of antisocial acts directly reflects exposure to such episodes, via family, television, other media sources, and emanates from the breakdown of parent effectiveness in discipline. The coercion model addresses the antisocial youth’s behavior as being embedded in a larger context through stages of development. The critical contextual variables to examine include socio-economic status, youth was a difficult infant, antisocial parent models, divorce, residing in a high crime neighborhood, and severe and chronic life stress. Determinants of antisocial behavior, according to Patterson’s model, are poor family management skills, which include lack of monitoring, inconsistent discipline, positive reinforcement, and problem solving skills, all of which lead to antisocial behavior and social incompetence. It is in such coercive contexts that many youth come to see guns as their allies during times of conflict.

In closing, we suspect that you might like to have some idea about how many guns are on school campuses in California each day. The truthful answer is that we do not know. However, if it is assumed that California’s schools are similar to those included in other national and regional studies, a conservative estimate for self-reported school gun possession can be made. Studies generally indicate that about 3% to 4% of high school pupils (grades 7 to 12) say they have brought a gun to school in the previous month. The most informed position to take on this matter currently is to presume that the 3% to 4% monthly figure is approximately accurate for your secondary school and to make the calculations accordingly. These figures are frightening, but it is important to recognize that between 1960 and 1989 there was a 416% increase in handgun ownership in the United States and that the total number of firearms outnumbers handguns by threefold (Larson, 1994). With so many guns present in our society it is perhaps fortuitous that so few of them find their way on to school campuses.

REFERENCES


FOOTNOTES

1 Guns are not neutral objects—their mere presence is associated with increases of emotional urges to commit impulsive aggressive acts. Berkowitz (1994), in fact, has suggested that in highly emotionally situations the "trigger can pull the finger" (p. 272).

2 The revised California Safe Schools Assessment procedure was in initiated on July 1, 1995. All schools are again required to report each incident of crime occurring on the school campus, at school events, or on the way directly to/from school. For information about this reporting program contact: Dr. Pat Hanson, Butte County Office of Education, 1859 Bird Street, Oroville, CA 95965. (916) 538-6929.

3 With respect to toy gun playing, Berkowitz (1994) suggests that there is no evidence that aggressive toy gun playing has a positive cathartic effects. An encouraging finding is that there is no evidence that toy gun playing promotes long-term aggressiveness, however, he suggests that adults be mindful to not reinforce aggressive fantasy play, which is positively associated with youth aggression.

4 California Wellness Foundation. The Campaign to Prevent Handgun Violence Against Kids. 454 Las Gallinas Ave., Suite 177, San Rafael, CA 94903-3618. (415) 331-3337. This is a high-profile, well-funded effort to support programs designed to reduce gun violence. Resources are available as well as information about many programs being implemented throughout the state.

5 It is likely that school psychologists are (or should be) working with many of the youth who report bringing guns to school, whether the gun possession is known or not. Some of these students may present antisocial behavior patterns whereas others may feel alienated and distrusting of people at school.

6 The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing has recently issued the final report of its School Violence Advisory Panel (Dear et al., 1995) that addresses many public policy issues in this area. This report includes the results of school violence surveys and focus groups conducted throughout California as well as training recommendations and suggestions for all educators including pupil personnel services staff. The Panel is also beginning to work on a resource guide to accompanying its final report. For information contact Dr. Joe Dear, Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1812 9th Street, Sacramento, CA 95814.

7 Presuming that gun possession is evenly distributed across the 20 school days in a given month, this would mean that on any given day there are about 2 guns per 1000 students at school. Because the term “brought a weapon (gun) to school” has not been rigorously defined, we do not know if this means the guns are in the students immediate possession, in their lockers, stashed near school, or otherwise readily available. In addition, there is no reliable evidence about how frequently students bring guns to school on any given day in a given month, so estimates of “daily” gun possession incidents are not well founded. Some schools may have no guns on campus on a given day whereas other schools may have several. School psychologists can help their schools by participating in the collection of gun possession and other school safety related information.