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OJJDP

JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Terrence S. Donahue, Acting Administrator

October 1989

Weapons in Schools

ACQUISITIONS

Nearly 3 million attempted or completed street crimes (assault, rape, robbery, or theft) took place inside schools or on school property during 1987, according to the National Crime Survey. The more serious personal victimizations included an estimated 75,900 aggravated assaults (50,980 with injury), and almost 350,000 simple assaults (nearly 110,000 with injury).¹

These statistics lend credence to a recent headline that read, "Reading, Writing and Ducking Bullets." Gunfights are replacing fistfights, and "bullet drills" are replacing fire drills on many campuses. The situation is so serious that superintendents and security officials from the Nation's largest urban school districts listed weapons on campus as one of their five top concerns in a survey conducted last year by the National School Safety Center (NSSC).² Several incidents support their fears:

❑ A 13-year-old in Clearwater, Florida, threatened to "torture and kill" his social

studies teacher after receiving a poor grade. When taken into custody, he had two pistols, a box of bullets, and a switchblade.

❑ An eighth grader in Portland, Connecticut, who was suspended for refusing to remove his hat, brought an assault rifle to Portland Junior High School, killed the janitor, and wounded the principal and his secretary.

❑ After being bullied and taunted by other students for weeks, a high school senior in Buffalo, New York, placed a pipe bomb in the locker of one of the students, who was severely wounded when the bomb exploded.



A growing problem

Students bring a variety of weapons to school, ranging from knives to guns to explosive devices. Between July 1, 1987, and June 30, 1988, California school officials confiscated 8,539

weapons, including 789 guns, 4,408 knives, 2,216 explosives, and 1,126 "other weapons."³ The Detroit Public Schools Code of Conduct Offense Profile for August 1986 through July 1987 listed 519 disciplinary actions for possession of weapons.⁴

Smaller school districts may not experience a large number of weapons in schools, but their concern is just as real as that of larger schools. The number of students disciplined for possessing firearms in schools in Duval County, Florida, nearly tripled from 23 to 63 between 1986 and 1987.⁵ Nashville, Tennessee, experienced a similar increase, with 107 students suspended for having weapons on campus during the 1986-1987 school year, up from the 75 students caught with weapons the year before.⁶

These statistics represent only those students who were caught with weapons. Some students who bring weapons to school go undetected. A 1988 study by a

From the Administrator

Schools are frequently overlooked as a complement to the juvenile justice system, yet they play a vital role in delinquency prevention. Schools contribute to students' personal and social growth and help them develop into responsible, productive, law-abiding citizens.

But learning and growth are not possible in schools where some students are disruptive and others are intimidated, and where classrooms are unsafe. Without a safe, orderly school environment, learning cannot and will not take place.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) recognizes that

quality education and safe schools go hand in hand. We also recognize that the discipline problems today's teachers face differ dramatically from those in years past. For example, the biggest school problems perceived by teachers 25 years ago were gum chewing, followed by talking, loud and boisterous students, and unruly behavior.

Compare this to today's school environment where, in some instances, handguns rather than fists have become the weapons of choice. Although weapons on campus are certainly not a problem in all schools, they are raising concerns in many communities across the country.

To help school officials respond to the weapons issue, OJJDP asked school superin-

tendents from a number of urban school districts to share their suggestions for keeping weapons out of schools. This *OJJDP Bulletin* summarizes their ideas, as well as those presented in a resource paper prepared by the National School Safety Center. The suggestions in this *Bulletin* provide school administrators with examples of how their peers are dealing with weapons and may help them develop their own strategies for safe schools where teachers can teach and students can learn.

Terrence S. Donahue
Acting Administrator

Baltimore court found that of 390 city high school students polled, 64 percent said they knew someone who had carried a handgun to school in the preceding months; 60 percent knew someone who had been shot, threatened, or robbed at gunpoint in school; and almost half the male respondents admitted carrying a handgun to school at least once.⁷

Although knives are the most common weapons found in schools, increasingly sophisticated firearms are readily available to students—greatly multiplying the potential for serious injury or death. For example, a school security officer told a gang conference in Garden Grove, California, about receiving a tip that a student had a weapon on campus. He located the student, wrestled him to the floor, confiscated his duffel bag, and found a loaded Uzi 9mm rifle inside.

In many larger cities, the problem of weapons in school is exacerbated by an attitude among some gang members that the bigger the guns, the “badder” you are. Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Deputy Roy Nunez describes the proliferation of automatic weapons as an “arms race” in which “no one wants to be left behind.”

Students carry weapons for a variety of reasons. Some simply want to show off, others arm themselves out of fear. Many carry weapons to school because of the escalation of gangs and illegal drug activity. For some juveniles, displaying and using guns is a way of life. A first grader, for example, arrived at a Manhattan elementary school with a loaded .25-caliber semiautomatic pistol tucked in his belt. He said he needed something for show and tell.



Intervention strategies

The increase in weapons has led school officials to try a variety of strategies for confiscating weapons from students. Administrators and security personnel who attended an Urban School Safety Practicum in Detroit, sponsored by NSSC and OJJDP, reported that they have taken a number of steps to eliminate weapons from campuses, ranging

from searching lockers to using metal detectors.

Some schools use sweeps and searches to confiscate weapons. “In Portland, we tell the students up front that we own the lockers, and we will search them whenever it’s necessary to find weapons,” according to Donald McElroy, executive deputy superintendent of Portland, Oregon, public schools.

One of the most controversial methods of confiscating weapons is the use of metal detectors. The 1,600 students at Chester High School, south of Philadelphia, must pass through a metal detector at the school’s front entrance. Detroit has used metal detectors since 1985. Under a new security policy adopted by school officials in Montgomery, Alabama, walk-through metal detectors are used on a random basis in the district’s middle and high schools.

Frank Blount, director of security for Detroit schools, conducts surprise searches of schools when there is reason to believe disturbances are imminent. Students walk through portable, stand-up metal detectors. When necessary, hand searches are conducted in a separate holding room. Confiscated weapons are turned over to the police. But even Blount, who supports the use of metal detectors, qualifies his endorsement: “Everybody thinks metal detectors are the be-all and end-all. But it’s just another deterrent. It’s not a pleasant thing, but it’s one of the many things you have to do to bring to the attention of people that you have a problem.”

Some schools have developed policies that make it difficult for students to hide or transport weapons into school. In Montgomery, for example, students may carry only clear plastic or mesh bookbags so that weapons are readily visible. In Baltimore, students must keep coats and bookbags in lockers during the school day.

Students may be deterred from taking weapons to school if they know they face immediate suspension or expulsion. Many schools have clear policies regarding weapons violations. For example:

❑ In St. Louis, possession or use of weapons or dangerous instruments results in a student’s immediate removal from school, a hearing, and a recommendation for expulsion from the school system.

❑ In Providence, Rhode Island, a student caught with a weapon is automatically suspended for 60 days.

❑ In Polk County, Florida, students found carrying guns are recommended for expulsion for the remainder of the current school year and the following school year.

❑ In the New York City school district, possession of a weapon results in automatic suspension and the summoning of police.

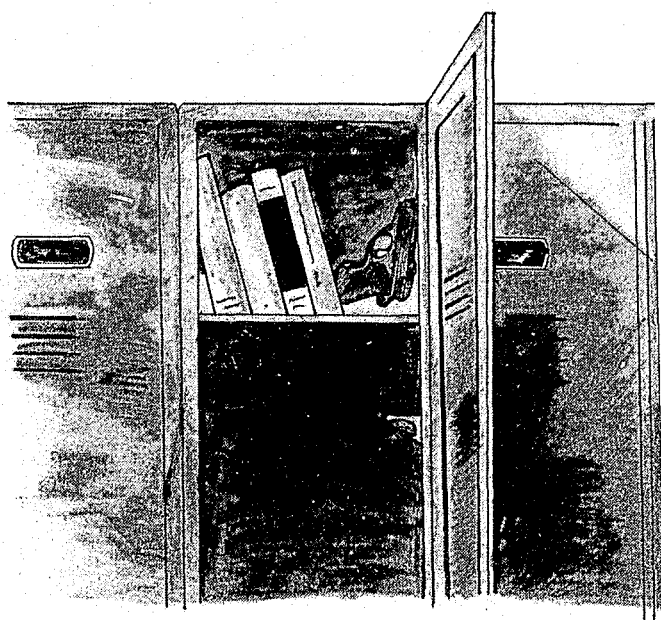
❑ A weapons violation in Detroit often leads to permanent expulsion from the school district.

❑ According to the California Education Code, a student who uses a weapon at school may not attend public school in California until a hearing is held to show the board of education that the student is no longer a risk.

Not everyone agrees on the use of expulsion, however. San Bernardino, California, school district administrator John Burton believes: “To remove students who have weapons from school and put them on the street with their weapons is to put out the fire at school but in the process spread it into the street.” Burton maintains that expulsion simply is not a unified solution to the problem.

Counseling programs can help change students’ attitudes and thus deter them from bringing weapons to school. These programs focus on self-discipline, self-image, rules, respect, avoiding unnecessary conflicts, and career planning. Students are taught to avoid situations in which they think weapons are necessary and to deal with conflicts in ways that don’t depend on confrontations or threats.

Peer counseling programs can also help change student attitudes about violence. The philosophy behind peer counseling is



that when students want to discuss a problem, they usually go to a friend. Such programs train students in empathetic listening, conflict resolution, and counseling skills. Peer counseling programs can help keep weapons off campus by helping angry or troubled students discuss and work through problems in a nonviolent manner.

A crisis intervention team also may help troubled students cope with crises that might otherwise cause them to bring a weapon onto campus. Shootings, arrests, and natural crises often lead to depression and frustration. During or immediately following a crisis, such teams meet with students and offer them a sense of safety and security by talking about the crisis. They give the students an opportunity to ventilate and validate their fears and frustrations and prepare them for the time when the anger goes away.



Disarming of students

Despite the best strategies, a teacher or administrator may be confronted by a student armed with a gun. "There is no right answer about how to deal with a student with a gun," according to Alex Rascon, director of security for the San Diego Unified School District. "It's a judgment call on the part of the person

who makes the initial confrontation." However, he offers the following suggestions:

First, don't panic; second, evaluate the situation quickly. "There's a reason for the kid to have a gun as far as he or she is concerned, and you have to be quick enough to spot it," Rascon says. "Talk to the student. Say, 'I know you're a good kid; why are you doing this? Something's wrong. Let's go in the office and talk about it.' Offer help and counseling. Don't be macho and grab the gun. Stay calm and work your way toward the end result you want: to have the gun in your possession."

Although a school official should be calm when approaching the student, an authoritative manner also is necessary, Rascon adds. "You can demand things, but once you start, you can't back down, because once he sees you're afraid he'll start showing off and doing crazy things. Don't forget there's often peer pressure involved. Give the student a way to save face," he says.

Any situation involving a weapon is dangerous; however, school officials have one advantage. "Nine times out of ten, you'll know the kid," Rascon says, "and that's half the battle won already."



Prevention strategies

Prevention strategies are also crucial if administrators are going to keep weapons out of schools. Good intervention strategies can make students think twice about taking a weapon to school. But what strategies help students feel they should not carry a weapon?

A positive school climate where students feel safe sends the message that students don't need to come to school armed. The motto of George Washington Preparatory High School in Los Angeles is, "We are family."

Students are asked to sign a nonviolence contract with their parents. The school conducts periodic peace marches in the community. Former principal George McKenna, now superintendent of the Inglewood, California, school district, believes a family atmosphere is crucial to keeping crime and violence out of school.

Education and public awareness programs also can deter students from coming to school armed. The police department of Baltimore County, Maryland, recently began a 33-month pilot community education program to provide information about gun safety and dispute resolution techniques. The program, for kindergarten through 12th grade, also counters images that make guns appealing to children.

The Baltimore City, Maryland, public school district has begun a public awareness campaign. Larry Borgan, chief of school police, says a poster campaign has increased awareness of the problem. The poster features a gun pointed at the reader with the caption, "GUNS KILL. KEEP THEM OUT OF SCHOOL! CALL SCHOOL POLICE." The campaign includes a gun hotline, monitored by school security personnel, where information can be called in anonymously.

Curriculums that teach conflict resolution skills also can be used to change attitudes about weapons. *Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents*, a manual written by Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, was developed and tested in Boston

schools through the Boston Youth Program. The curriculum helps students become more aware of "positive ways to deal with anger and arguments (the leading precipitant of homicide), how fights begin and how they escalate, and the choices, other than fighting, that are available to young people in conflict situations."⁸

Another curriculum, prepared by the Community Board Center for Policy and Training in San Francisco, helps secondary school students better understand and resolve conflicts in their own lives—at school, at home, and in the community.

Some local jurisdictions and State legislatures are considering legislation requiring

firearm owners to secure their weapons in gun safes. Much like a safety cap on a medicine bottle, a gun safe keeps firearms tightly locked away from children. Under some local codes, parents are held liable for the irresponsible storage of lethal weapons.



Better teacher education

Education programs that prepare future teachers to deal with problems in the classroom are also essential, according to the deans of some of the leading schools of education who attended a Teacher Education Safety Practicum sponsored by NSSC and OJJDP.

New teachers are dropping out of the profession at a faster rate than students are dropping out of high school. Citing a 1988 USA Today poll, NSSC Executive Director Ronald D. Stephens notes that 62 percent of teachers questioned from the country's two leading teachers' associations, the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, felt they were inadequately prepared in college to do their job.

Dr. Norbert Maertens, dean of education at Auburn University, believes, "Inadequate training makes teachers feel betrayed once they enter the classroom for the first time."

Many institutions of higher learning do an outstanding job training today's teachers. However, many teachers, frustrated about their inadequate college preparation, have indicated that many teacher training institutions need to revise their curriculums and provide teachers with the crucial classroom survival and performance skills they need.

The deans stressed that prospective teachers must be trained to respond more effectively to student drug abuse, gang activity, weapons on campus, and other violent and disruptive situations in schools. All agreed that the quality of preparation that teacher training institutions provide can largely determine an educator's success or failure.



Summary

Carrying weapons to school has become an acceptable risk for too many students. The presence of weapons on campus places the entire academic community at risk and makes everyone a potential victim. Schools and communities must develop strategies to deter students from bringing weapons to school as well as strategies to intervene when students do bring weapons to school. These strategies may include a variety of responses, ranging from locker searches to metal detectors to public awareness campaigns.



Making campuses safe is everyone's responsibility—parents, educators, law enforcers, judges, youth-serving professionals, and students. Keeping weapons off campus is an obvious step toward making schools safer and more productive for all of America's students.



National School Safety Center

The National School Safety Center is funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education and Pepperdine University. The Center helps schools respond more effectively to problems with youth gangs, drugs, and violence by providing technical assistance, training, and resource materials to school administrators, law enforcement officials, youth-serving agencies, and community leaders. To learn more about strategies to effectively address the problems caused by weapons in schools, contact the National School Safety Center, 16830 Ventura Boulevard, Suite 200, Encino, CA 91436. Below is a partial list of resources available from NSSC.

NSSC Resource Paper—Weapons in Schools. Much of the information in this *OJJDP Bulletin* was taken from a 32-page information booklet published by NSSC in response to growing concern about weapons in schools. It includes a statistical overview of the problem and strategies in schools around the country, a list of resources for additional information, and a series of new articles about incidents involving weapons in schools. \$3.00.

School Safety Check Book. This comprehensive guidebook for educators and law enforcement personnel provides strategies for dealing with a wide range of violent and disruptive situations, including those involving weapons on school campuses. \$12.00.

Strategies for Keeping Schools Safe

Administrators and security personnel who attended the Urban School Safety Practicum in Detroit sponsored by NSSC and OJJDP recommended six strategies for making schools safer:

- ❑ Involve the public in school activities by forming citizen advisory groups or task forces made up of members of local business, religious, and civic organizations. For example, Seattle's "Operation Rescue" uses citizens for counseling and to build a support system for students. Seattle Public Schools Superintendent William Kendrick says, "Education is the whole community's business in Seattle." He notes that the mayor releases city employees during working hours to tutor students, and Pacific Northwest Bell offers employment assistance and scholarships to students who stay in school.
- ❑ Improve school leadership skills. Through effective leadership, principals and other administrators can change unproductive schools or enhance already positive school climates. Vision, persuasiveness, and commitment to excellence are key characteristics that school leaders should embody as they guide their staffs, students, and parents. School safety measures, including site security, discipline, drug and gang suppression, and character development curriculums, require top-level support.
- ❑ Make schools and the surrounding community drug free by developing comprehensive, systemwide efforts to combat drug abuse. These efforts should involve the school, home, community, law enforcement, and health services. This strategy should include apprehension, prevention, intervention, education,

counseling, and student and public awareness programs.

- ❑ Halt negative gang activity. "The number of gangs and their membership is growing in many of our urban centers," according to NSSC Executive Director Ronald D. Stephens. "Gangs are migrating to areas far distant from their home turf as they provide the link between big-time crime and small-time drug users. Schools are often caught in the middle." To combat gangs, schools must establish clear expectations about acceptable behavior and maintain visible staff on campus to create a sense of safety and send the message that gangs do not control the schools.
- ❑ Improve discipline of youth in schools by implementing a clear, comprehensive code of student conduct. Copies of the code should be distributed to students and parents. To be effective, school administrators must strictly and consistently enforce discipline policies.
- ❑ Encourage students to report weapons violations to school officials. Tips from students are among the most effective ways of detecting weapons on school campuses. Practicum participants suggested that schools encourage tips by establishing a student hotline or peer program. Donald McElroy, executive deputy superintendent of Portland, Oregon, public schools, believes teachers are the key to developing a school climate in which students feel a responsibility to report weapons. During homeroom periods, Portland teachers emphasize that students who report weapons are not tattletales but are actually doing themselves, others, and the youth who carry weapons a favor.

"What's Wrong With This Picture?"

This 18-minute docudrama recreates five actual cases of school-related crime and violence, narrated by the individuals involved. The scenarios include drug abuse, bullying, teacher abuse, and a student stabbing. Videotape \$25.00; 16mm film \$150.00.

Urban School Safety Practicum

Report. School and law enforcement officials from the Nation's 15 largest school districts met in Detroit in April 1988 to discuss key safety problems affecting schools. Weapons, gangs, and drugs in schools, and more effective discipline and leadership topped the list of concerns. Free.

NSSC Training and Technical

Assistance. NSSC's Field Services staff responds regularly to requests for group presentations and meetings with key law enforcement and education policymakers about weapons in schools.

Notes

1. Wetzel, James R. "School Crime: Annual Statistical Snapshot," *School Safety*, Winter 1989, p. 8.
2. National School Safety Center. *Urban School Safety Practicum*, Detroit, Michigan, April 12-13, 1988.
3. "A Report to the California State Legislature Regarding the Standard School Crime Reporting Program for the 1987-88 School Year." California State Department of Education, March 1987, p. 279.
4. "Code of Conduct Offense Profile, August 1986 through July 1987." Detroit Public Schools, August 1987, p. 279.
5. Price, Nancy. "Concern Grows as Duval School Gun Incidents Soar," *Florida Times-Union* (Jacksonville, Florida), July 9, 1987, p. A-1.

6. Canfield, Clarke. "Weapons In Schools Up Sharply," *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, Tennessee), May 29, 1987.

7. Hackett, George. "Kids; Deadly Force," *Newsweek*, January 11, 1988, p. 18.

8. Prothrow-Stith, Deborah. *Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents*. Newton, Massachusetts: Education Development Center, Inc., 1987.

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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