



July 10, 2019

## *The Stupidity of Arming Teachers*

**Jerry Haar**

Imagine, if you will, the following scenario. Katherine Gomez, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade biology teacher, frequents an indoor gun range on weekends. Pistol shooting has been a hobby of hers for the past 7 years, and she is very proficient—in fact, a marksman. Slow firing at 15 yards, Katherine can hit bullseye after bullseye. She is confident that if her state were to allow teachers to carry firearms, she would have the upper hand over any armed assailant at her school.

This is dead wrong. Katherine's belief is both dangerous naïve. She is not considering that one of her students whom she just failed on a major exam—a 6'4" 245 lb. linebacker on the school's football team—could confront her and threaten her to the point of fearing for her life, at which instant she would draw her pistol from her purse only to have the football snatch the gun away from her and shoot her.

And it needn't be a student. An angry parent or fellow teacher could threaten and physically assault Katherine. And even if she shot the assailant, it is highly unlikely a self-defense claim would stand up in court. Bear in mind, too, the 3-3-3- rule: almost all confrontations between two individuals occur within 3 feet, with no more than 3 shots being fired in 3 seconds. So Katherine's pistol prowess on the range is irrelevant here, especially given that people are not static paper targets—they *move*.

The debate over arming teachers must be understood within the context of armed violence at schools whether one-on-one, as in the illustration above, or mass shootings as in Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland.

According to criminologists Jillian Peterson and James Densley, there have been 160 mass public shootings that have taken place in the U.S. since 1966, with gun violence actually having decreased since the 1990s with the exception of *mass* school shootings.

One should ask: Is there a pattern to these horrific school tragedies? According to U.S. Department of Justice data, would-be school shooters are male, white and between 12 and 17; 45% had witnessed or experienced childhood trauma; 77% had mental health concerns and also an interest in past shootings; 87% showed signs of a crisis before the shooting; and *nearly 80% revealed their plans ahead of time, nearly the same percentage that were identified as suicidal*. Research by Dr.

George Everly of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine identified 5 major factors that explain the increase in school violence we see today: predatory bullying and marginalization, weaponized social media, inadequate access to mental health services, media coverage, and the ease of availability of firearms.

But what about equipping teachers with firearms to prevent school massacres? Arming teachers ignores the studies showing that guns at school create greater risk to children. The leading educational organizations—NEA and AFT—along with school safety experts, police officers, and the findings of scientific research all oppose arming teachers. To begin with, firearm training, including weapon manipulation, care and cleaning, requires lots of time, not to mention range time on a regular basis. That is time away from curriculum and materials development and other duties related to class preparation. As for the school district, besides the additional costs of training teachers, firearms, and ammunition, there is the cost for insurance, as well.

Video games and movies that glorify gunfights are oblivious to real-life situations in which fear, panic and the risk of death discombobulate even emotionally strong individuals. In an ABC News show a video simulation revealed how people repeatedly fail to shoot an active shooter before they are shot.

Shockingly, trained law officers average only a 20% hit ratio in armed encounters; so why do we think a teacher, like Katherine Gomez would do any better? Also 21% of officers killed with a handgun were shot with their own weapon—again confirming the illustration above. FBI analyses reveal that law enforcement suffers casualties in nearly half the incidents where they engage the shooter to end the threat.

What is to be done?

In a nation of nearly 330 million people, there is bound to be a disproportionate number of emotionally ill people. And while mass shootings make up less than 2% of gun deaths in the United States, extensive media coverage and sensationalism exacerbate the portrayal of these horrific acts.

We have known for years what needs to be done: better parenting, more mental health counseling, greater monitoring of emotionally troubled students, and armed guards and metal detectors and cameras at schools. And finally, a national ban on assault rifles—the weapon of choice in mass school shootings. Note: no one hunts deer or shoots ducks with an AR-15 that fires rounds that travel 3 times faster than those from a handgun.

Protection must go hand-in-hand with prevention and physical security with mental health counseling. No other prescription will remedy or at least alleviate the tragedies of mass shootings at schools.

---

*Jerry Haar is a business professor at Florida International University and a Global Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.*