

Guns in schools: a closer look at accidental shootings

R Casella¹, M Potterton²

¹Central Connecticut State University and visiting researcher, University of the Witwatersrand, School of Education and professional studies, Johannesburg, South Africa

²School of Education and professional studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

Violence has become a pervasive part of the social fabric of South African society, and researchers have shown that young people are twice as likely as adults to be victims of at least one crime. As a result schools are frequently perceived as places associated with harm and fear. This paper sets out to briefly explore the policy context, describe some of the shooting incidents and considers some ways of addressing accidental shootings in school. While there are many concerns related to school violence, this paper focuses on accidental shootings.

Some simple steps are proposed to make students more aware of potential tragedies associated with guns.

- Schools should have periodic talks or lectures about the lethality of guns, especially with boys and students should be made aware of the incidents that have occurred in schools.
- Parents must be made aware that many youths get guns from home. Guns need to be locked-up, or not owned at all. Parents must be made aware in writing that they can be held responsible if a gun is taken from home by a youth and brought to school.
- Students should be made aware of the importance of immediately reporting if they see a gun or suspect that a student has a gun. This should be done periodically throughout the school year.

These steps cannot guarantee a gun-free school or that gun-related violence will not occur; rather, they are steps that are useful in helping to prevent a tragedy, as they raise awareness and communication about guns in school.

Keywords: School shootings, school violence, school safety, crime prevention

Received: 04.09.06

Accepted: 29.09.06

Introduction

Violence has become a pervasive part of the social fabric of South African society. A front-page article in a recent Sunday paper cautioned that violent crime is threatening to turn South Africa's public schools into war zones.¹ Other newspapers have also alerted us to the apparent rise in violence in schools.^{2,3} A national survey of 4 409 young people published in May 2006 confirms that 41.5% of South African youth are victims of crime and violence.⁴ The researchers show that young people are twice as likely as adults to be victims of at least one crime. Schools are perceived as places associated with harm and fear and at least one in five young people have been threatened, harmed or hurt while at school.

This paper sets out to briefly explore the policy context, describe some of the shooting incidents and considers some ways of addressing accidental shootings in school. While there are many

concerns related to school violence, this paper focuses on accidental shootings for two reasons. First, while many individuals perceive school shootings as the outcome of gang violence and homicidal rages by youths, many shootings that occur in schools are, at least in part, accidental. They involve youths who bring guns to school in order to show-off or protect themselves, and end-up shooting someone. While we can debate how "accidental" a shooting is when someone intentionally brings a loaded weapon to school, the point is that many of these shootings are not intentional. There is a difference between the youth that brings a gun to school and intends to shoot a particular person or people and the youth who brings a gun to school but does not have the intention of firing the weapon. While we cannot excuse the latter, we must take into account the difference between the former and the latter, especially when we are interested in preventing all forms of school shootings. Second, accidental shootings are more likely avoidable—at least more so than intended shootings. While it is difficult to unravel the underlying circumstances that lead to school gun violence related to gangs, revenge, and rampage shootings, accidental shootings are usually caused by negligence and lack of awareness. It is our contention that these latter causes are more easily dealt with than the more complex issues that lead to intentional shootings. However, most schools focus on intentional shootings and ignore accidental shootings.

Correspondence:

Prof Ronnie Casella, Central Connecticut State University, 615 Stanley Street, New Britain, Connecticut 06050, USA
email: Casellar@mail.ccsu.edu
Mark Potterton
email: mark@umalusi.org.za

The policy context

The Arms and Ammunition Act of 1969 was the first major legislation dealing with guns in South Africa. However, in 2001, this legislation was overhauled and the Firearm Control Act became the major legislation governing the ownership of guns by the public.⁵ This legislation is informed by thinking that says that the overall supply and availability of guns needs to be reduced through pricing and taxation, and that gun access needs to be restricted from certain groups (e.g. youths, convicted criminals and drug abusers). Gun owners also need to be more vigilant about storage, and should be held liable if guns are used by others in committing offences.⁶ The new legislation, which was again updated in 2003, had to be written to take into account the abolishment of apartheid, the country's history of political violence, and the writing of a new constitution in 1996. The legislation also had to contend with resistance to gun control by a vocal minority and the difficulty of enforcing gun policies, which also reflected certain aspects of the country's culture and history. Guns, for example, are often seen as a part of rugged, rural Afrikaans culture and a right as well as a need in light of the country's high rates of violence.⁷ Also, the availability and abundance of guns are results of the struggle and near civil war of the apartheid years, where the flow of guns to police, paramilitary forces, and anti-apartheid organizations was aided by other countries, and the stockpiling of guns was abetted by what was essentially an internal war combined with secret wars in Namibia, Angola, and other countries.⁸

In the early 21st century, gun legislation will also have to take into account incidents involving school shootings. These shootings differ in many ways to the types of gun violence that defined the apartheid years, where violence was often between races and among black political and tribal groups.^{9,10} Whereas schools were sites for struggle, boycotts, and hubs for political violence, now they are more likely affected by criminality and random and accidental shootings. Shootings since 2000 have occurred in government and Catholic schools, and on school buses, but few had anything to do with political movements. The type of gun violence in schools has changed as the country has changed.

Policies have tried to deal with school shootings. Beginning in 2000, the Minister of Safety and Security has been able to declare certain areas, such as schools, firearm-free zones and the South African Police Department in collaboration with schools have begun implementing the law.¹¹ The age of a person who is permitted to own a gun has also been raised from 16 to 18. However, while gun polices associated with the Firearms Control Act are important in managing the ownership of guns and can help in keeping guns out of the hands of criminals, it remains easy for many youths, even those under the legal age for gun ownership, to get a gun.^{12,13} A recent survey also explored young people's access to firearms.⁴ Around a quarter of the respondents in Gauteng said that it would be very easy for them to obtain firearms from their homes. Knives and other weapons were even more accessible.

Though the Arms and Ammunition Act and the Firearms Control Act are important policies, they have not been entirely effective in keeping guns out of schools and keeping children safe. In the Leoschut and Burton survey, many of the respondents (68.6%) reported that they were exposed to crime in their communities, and schools were not seen as being safe places either. School corridors, toilets, open grounds and hallways were

identified as places where respondents felt afraid, and males tended to be more victimised than females at schools. It is difficult to say if gun violence in schools is on the rise in South Africa, but certainly the media and some statistics suggest that it is; teachers, principals, and learners have been killed and primary school students have been involved as both victim and perpetrators.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ This has prompted more public concern about gun violence in schools, but also it has changed the type of concern. Whereas gun violence had been more political in the past, now it seemed more random, sometimes accidental, and in some areas related to gangs.¹⁷ Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of recent gun violence has been a series of shootings that appear accidental and without justification.

Accidental Shootings

It is easier to grasp the political violence of the past and the gang-related violence of the present—the causes and motives are usually clear. But shootings that can not be wholly understood need to be taken into account in all further policies and school practices. In a 2002 incident at St. Gemma's School a 10-year old boy brought a gun to school and shot an eight year old girl apparently by mistake. This occurred inside a classroom while class was being given by the teacher.¹⁸ Apparently the boy had been pointing the gun at the teacher when her back was turned. According to classmates, those who saw him doing this thought the gun was fake. However, on the third time he went to fetch the gun from the bag, the gun accidentally went off and the bullet struck a 8-year old girl in the stomach.

In another Catholic School, in 2006, a boy was shot in the leg while in the school toilets. Two boys were involved in the shooting; and again, the incident appeared to be an accident. According to the two boys, one boy brought the gun from home to show another classmate; they went to the toilet to look at the gun and while taking the gun out of the bag, it accidentally went off and shot a third boy in the thigh. Sometimes incidents involve students from outside the school. In one 2006 incident, a 15 year old student was shot and killed while sitting near the fence of his school, within school property.¹⁹ The boy who fired the gun was outside the fence, and was not a pupil at the school. He approached the fence and began showing-off his gun to students inside the school. As with many accidental—or allegedly accidental—school shootings, the exact course of events is not clear, but in the end, the boy with the gun shot one boy in the head, killing him, and wounded another when the same bullet struck another learner in the stomach.

There are forms of gun violence in schools that are related to gangs, revenge shootings (where sometimes community violence spills over into the school), and related to conflicts that escalate (as when bullying gets out of hand and leads to a school shooting). A study carried out in the United States of America on rampage shootings suggest five broad conditions (but not necessary) for shootings.²⁰ The first is the shooters perception of himself as marginal in the social group that matters to him. The second is that the shooters suffer from psychosocial problems like depression, mental illness, abuse that increases the feeling of marginality. The third is that shooting teachers and classmates will resolve the problems. The fourth is the failure of the surveillance systems that should alert schools to troubled young people. The fifth is gun availability – young people have too easy access to guns. These conditions might be useful in understanding shootings in South Africa, but will need to be

further explored. These are forms of school shootings that have received a lot of attention in writing and in the creation of interventions involving school violence, gangs, and violence related to communities.^{21,22} But a form of violence that has proved itself significant in recent years must also be given attention and be understood: accidental shootings. Of course, in all "accidental" shootings, there is always a certain amount of doubt as to whether or not the incident was really accidental or partly accidental. In spite of these uncertainties, they are unique because the exact culpability of the shooter is hard to determine and the reason for the shooting is often less understood than in targeted violence. It is sometimes easier for us to process a gang-related schooling, or a shooting involving revenge or hatred for a particular group, than a shooting that involves a mishap and an innocent bystander.

Recent incidents involving school shootings in South Africa demonstrate the usual problems of school violence, community problems, and gangs; but also many incidents highlight particular facts about accidental shootings, youths and guns. These too need to be considered if schools are going to remain safe. These include the fact that:

1. Many incidents involving school shootings are not intentional. In some cases, students are playing with guns and they accidentally go off. Many youths do not understand the seriousness and lethality of guns.
2. Many guns that youths acquire are owned by older family members. Youths get guns from homes. Sometimes these are legally owned firearms, and sometimes not.
3. Guns are often used as a way for students to get attention from other students. Students bring guns to school in order to show-off.
4. Other students often know that a gun is brought to school. Sometimes these students do not report the gun because they think it is fake. It is also possible that there is peer pressure among youths to not "snitch" on a student who has a gun.
5. Most youths who bring guns to school are boys. Incidents involving school shootings are overwhelmingly perpetrated by boys.

The issues that are raised by school shootings in South Africa since 2000 often clash with stereotypes. For example, many people believe that school shootings involve gangs or "bad kids." Many people also believe that schools are overwhelmingly dangerous, and they are sometimes depicted this way by the media. But the incidents related above demonstrate that school shootings involve youths who are not in gangs, that they occur in relatively peaceful schools, and often teachers and students are surprised to find particular students involved. In other words, we see that students who seem quite "normal" perpetuate lethal acts and that these acts occur in schools that are for the most part calm. As Mr. Ledwaba, principal of St Gemma's Catholic School, stated about the shooting that took place in 2002: "We had and still have a calm school. Kids are kids. We had little problems. Nothing like that ever happened, and not since."

Dealing with Accidental Shootings

While many interventions focus on gang-related problems and shootings that are intentional, very few take into account the kinds of issues raised in recent shootings, where youths may

have brought in guns without the intention to shoot someone, where incidents involved youths who did not fit the typical profile of a killer, and where the incidents happened in relatively peaceful schools, and in some cases, in private, Catholic schools. In addition to the government policies discussed earlier, and the type of interventions that are implemented to deal with targeted violence, the following 3 steps should be taken in all schools to deal with more accidental forms of gun violence. While we want to be careful not to label all youths potentially dangerous and all schools as potential sites for school shootings, recent incidents across South Africa demonstrate that all youths in all schools need to learn about the lethality of guns

Some simple steps can be taken in schools to make students more aware of potential tragedies.

1. Schools should have periodic talks or lectures about the lethality of guns, especially with boys. Students should be made aware of the incidents that have occurred in schools, and how events can turn tragic quite quickly, even when the shooter had not meant for a tragic outcome.
2. Parents must be made aware that many youths get guns from home. Guns need to be locked-up, or not owned at all. Parents must be made aware in writing that they will be held responsible if a gun is taken from home by a youth and brought to school.
3. Students should be made aware of the importance of immediately reporting if they see a gun or suspect that a student has a gun. Students should be reminded of this periodically throughout the school year. No student should assume that a gun is fake or a toy.

These steps cannot guarantee a gun-free school or that gun-related violence will not occur; rather, they are 3 steps that are useful in helping to prevent a tragedy, for they aim to raise awareness and communication about guns in school. Some individuals have been rightly critical of "awareness programmes." Some feel that they have the effect of making kids even more curious about guns, and this can be especially true when programmes are run by pro-gun organizations, such as the Eddie Eagle Gun Safe Programme that is run by the National Rifle Association in the United States.²³ In a similar way, prevention programmes having to do with sex and drugs have also been criticized for actually increasing the likelihood that students will experiment.

While there is always the possibility that a programme may increase a learners' curiosity, the 3 steps are not so much a programme as an informal set of activities teachers and principals and learners could do a few times during the school year. They do not advertise guns, but rather, raises awareness about what may have been a way to prevent past shootings at schools, especially those that were at least in part accidental. Clearly, some students are naive, and some parents are careless; both need to be taught about, and in some cases reminded of, commonsense facts about guns: They can be lethal; and accidents happen unexpectedly. Learners get guns from home; this is also true in cases of suicide. And learners cannot assume, and in some cases cannot use as an excuse, the reasoning that they thought a gun was a toy or fake, and therefore did not report it. The 3 steps are meant to make sure that these excuses and acts of carelessness and naiveté do not lead to another shooting.

Conclusion

There are many reasons students bring guns to school—some feel that they need to carry guns for self-protection; others bring guns because of their background and environment. The Ekurhuleni Safe Schools Programme is typical of gun prevention that deals with these more obvious and entrenched factors related to gun violence in schools. A Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation report describes the programme as follows:

A recently launched Ekurhuleni Safe School Programme reflects growing concern with violence in school, now intermeshed with a new set of contemporary challenges, in particular, an escalating drug abuse problem, partly linked to the increased availability of recreational drugs, since the opening up of South Africa's borders after 1994. The Safe Schools Programme is described by Ekurhuleni mayor and former community activist, Duma Nkosi, as a strategy to deal with with crime and violence at schools. Nkosi expressed concern about the levels of gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse at schools, saying the programme was designed to root out these problems and 'bring the book' drug runners and drug lords.²⁴

Like many safe school programmes, the one being undertaken in Ekurhuleni attempts to attack deeply entrenched problems that must be dealt with through proper policing, community interventions and social work, government policies implemented well, and other structural reforms that aim to root out underlying causes of gun violence. These are commendable actions. But what about the other forms of gun violence that recent incidents highlight—those involving incidents that appear accidental?

The facts about accidental shootings and the three steps described in this paper are meant to be school-based actions that may have an immediate positive effect in dealing with accidental, or less intentional, forms of gun violence. For example, to raise the awareness of parents that many guns involved in accidental shootings are obtained from home due to the parents' own negligence may change their behaviours; they may just start to lock-up their guns, even if social circumstances in the community remain the same. Similarly, while a child may still feel compelled to carry a gun for self-defence, if youths are made aware of the importance of notifying authorities about this, a potential tragedy may be avoided. This does not change the dilemma faced by the learner who feels the need to carry a gun, but it may have the immediate effect of preventing the gun from being used, even accidentally, in the school. It is important to deal with the underlying causes of violence, as many sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, and others, have argued. But it is also important to take careful, immediate actions in a school that can help on a daily basis to educate learners and parents alike about the potential lethality of guns, and what can be done to avoid not only targeted violence but also lethal mishaps and accidents.

References

1. Govender P. Pupil violence makes war zones of schools. *Sunday Times*, 4 June 2006: 1.
2. Andrew M. Teenager suspended after school shooting. *Daily News*, 30 May 2006: 2.
3. Kassiem A. More than 25% of Cape schools 'at high risk'. *Cape Times*, 31 May 2006: 3.
4. Leoschut L. & Burton P. *How Rich the Rewards? Results of the 2005 National Youth Victimization Study*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention 2006.
5. Gun Control Alliance. *Firearm Safety Programme: Keeping Kids Safe from Guns*. www.gca.org.za/facts/briefs, 2006.
6. Krahé B. *The Social Psychology of Aggression*. Hove: Psychology Press Ltd, 2001.
7. Barolsky V. *Transitioning out of Violence: Snapshots from Kathorus. Violence and Transition Project*, Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2005.
8. Marks M. *Young Warriors: Youth Politics, Identity, and Violence in South Africa*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press, 2001.
9. McKendrick B. & Hoffman W. *People and Violence in South Africa*. Oxford.: Oxford University Press, 1991.
10. Shaw M. *Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002.
11. Gun Control Alliance. *Firearm Free Schools: A Pilot Project*. www.gca.org.za/facts/briefs, 2006.
12. Palmay I. Rauch J. & Simpson G. *Violent Crime in Johannesburg*. In: Tomlinson R. Beauregard L. Bremner X. Mangcu, eds, *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
13. Nebandla I. *Confronting the Legacy of Weapons in Richmond, Kwazulu-Natal*. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2005.
14. Mutume G. *South Africa - Education: Violent Crime Begins in the Classroom*. www.oneworld.net/isp2/feb98/southafrica_crime, 1998.
15. Prinsloo I.J. *How Safe are South African Schools?* *South African Journal of Education*, 2005: 25: 5-10.
16. Badat N, J.Y. Russouw S. & Gounden F. *Criminals Target Children*. *Saturday Star*, April 29, 2006.
17. Pinnock D. *Gangs, Rituals, and Rites of Passage*. Cape Town: African Sun Press and the Institute of Criminology, 1997.
18. Nare S. *Shot at School!* *The Daily Sun*, 8 June 2004: 1.
19. Du Plessis J. *City Schoolboy Dies in Gun Drama*. *Pretoria News*, 10 May 2006: 1.
20. Newman K.S. Fox C. Harding D. Mehta J. & Roth W. *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.
21. Stevens G. Wyngaard G. & van Niekerk A. *The Safe Schools Model: An Antidote to School Violence? Perspectives in Education* 2001; 19: 145-158.
22. Sathiparsad R. *Addressing Barriers to Learning and Participation: Violence Prevention in Schools*. *Perspectives in Education* 2003; 21: 99-111.
23. Casella R. *At Zero Tolerance: Punishment, Prevention, and School Violence*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001.
24. Burton P. *Snapshot results of the 2005 National Youth Victimization Study*. *Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention Research Bulletin* 2006; 1: 1-3.