



School Social Work Association of America Position Paper

A Public Health Approach to School Safety & Violence Prevention

Just as cancer, motor vehicle accidents, and substance misuse are public health issues, so is gun violence in American schools. Multiple-victim school shootings are both tragic and preventable. According to the American Public Health Association, gun violence has become an epidemic: causing over 30,000 deaths per year and 60,000 injuries with an average of nearly two dozen children killed every day (Cox & Rich, 2018). These deaths and injuries are especially grievous when they happen to our children within the supposed safety of their schools.

FBI (2017) data show that schools have become the second most common location for active shooting incidents from 2000 to 2016 with 22% occurring in education facilities. Indeed, some of the worst mass casualty shootings have occurred in our nation's schools, including Columbine (1999) with 13 fatalities, Red Lake, MN (2005) with 10 fatalities, Virginia Tech (2007) with 32 fatalities, Newtown, CT (2012) with 27 fatalities, and Parkland, FL (2018) with 17 fatalities.

A United Nations survey of 14 developed nations found that all require gun licensing and all but one have gun storage laws, while the U.S. has neither. American children, ages 5 to 14, are 13x more likely to be murdered with a gun than children in other developed countries and 85% of all children murdered in the 14 developed countries are American children (Newbergh, 2013). According to research, guns have become the 3rd most common cause of death for children in America (Fowler, et al., 2017).

While SSWAA acknowledges the 2nd Amendment right of individual citizens to keep and bear arms (District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570, 2008 & McDonald v. Chicago, 561 U.S. 742, 2010), it also asserts that there are some commonsense ways to improve school safety and the right of our youngest citizens to possess the most basic of all human rights – the right to life. Accordingly, SSWAA:

1. Joins the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Child Abuse Coalition (2015) in their recommendation that Congress resume funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to conduct research on the prevention of gun violence, especially in our nation's schools.
2. Supports gun policies that require criminal background checks for all firearms purchases, including those sold at gun shows and on the Internet. Currently unlicensed private firearms sellers are exempt from conducting criminal background checks on buyers at gun shows or over the Internet, giving felons, the mentally ill and others prohibited from owning firearms access to weapons.
3. Encourages expanded access to mental health services. Funding for mental health services has been declining, and funding for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration continues to be threatened by budget cuts including cuts due to sequestration. We must ensure that state, local and community-based behavioral health systems have the resources they need to provide much-needed care.

4. Supports resources for school-based violence prevention programs. In accordance with the Every Student Succeeds Act, we support the creation of positive behavior interventions and supports and early intervention strategies. These should include school-wide programs that address bullying, violence, anger management, and other social and emotional issues that impede academic achievement. We also support school-based mental health services, especially school social workers, to ensure that children and youth can access appropriate treatment and services (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013).
5. Supports appropriate security measures such as appointment of a safety ombudsman, securing entrances to the school and remote monitoring systems, installing a centralized security system linked to a local emergency response team and a centralized communication system within the school building, issuing identification badges to staff and students, guiding visitors through a sign-in process, and requiring parking permits for all cars parked on school property (Advancement Project, 2013).
6. Supports crisis planning in schools with thorough preparation for an emergency; a detailed communications strategy; school and neighborhood site maps; drills and trainings; a response plan to evacuate, reverse evacuate, lockdown, or shelter in place; and a plan for helping students and staff to recover from psychological trauma.
7. Supports more research into gun safety technology (Newbergh, 2013). Smart guns or personalized guns are firearms that includes safety feature(s) that only allow it to fire when activated by an authorized user. Such features may include the use of RFID chips, fingerprint recognition, magnetic rings, or mechanical locks. Using wide area control technology, weapons could be remotely disabled using wireless protocols so that safe zones can be created around schools.
8. Opposes placing more police, security guards, or resource officers in schools because (1) they have not been proven to make schools safer, (2) the resources could be used to support programs and safety alternatives that do work, and (3) they further exacerbate the criminalization of children, particularly for students of color and students with disabilities who are disproportionately disciplined and arrested in school (Advancement Project, 2013). SSWAA does recognize that a well-trained school resource officer can play a vital role as part of a comprehensive school safety plan.
9. Opposes concealed carry options for school educators. As specialized instructional support personnel, SSWAA joins both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association in stating that educators do not want to be feared as armed guards, but do want to focus on our instructional roles in supporting sustainable school safety (Mroka & Busser, 2012).
10. If Congress refuses to reinstate the ban on semiautomatic assault weapons, SSWAA supports a requirement that the owners of such weapons be required to carry liability insurance in case the weapon is used against innocent civilians in order to compensate victims (or their families) for medical and funeral expenses incurred.

References

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