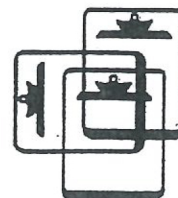


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Prevalence and Consequences of Students Exposure to Firearms in Traditionally "Safe" High Schools

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The availability and use of guns plague American high school students (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Firearm homicide ranks as the second leading cause of death for all adolescents between the ages of 15 to 19 and are the primary cause of death for African-Americans for that age group (Garbarino & Dubrow, 1992). Available data suggest the extreme vulnerability of all adolescents to assault injury. For example, 47% of males and 22% of females reported easy access to handguns. A survey of gun related violence around inner city schools reported that 20% of the students had been threatened with a gun and 12% had been shot at (Kim & Trent, 1998). Firearms have become intertwined with the lives of high-school students (Martinez & Richters, 1993).

Because most of the research has been conducted with inner city schools, the primary objective of this research is to explore the prevalence of firearms on a traditionally "safe" campus with no previous incidence of gun violence, and the psychological effects this exposure to firearms has on these students. The research questions are: 1) What percent of high school students have easy access to guns? 2) What are the demographics variables related to having easy access to a firearm? 3) How many students knew someone killed by gunfire? and 4) How does knowing someone killed by gunfire effect one's future outlook?

Method

Participants

The participants were 569 students enrolled in a high school located in a middle-high SES area of Los Angeles. The mean age was 16.24, $SD = 1.14$ (range: 14 to 18). Slightly more than one-half were females (53%). The student population was ethnically diverse: 28% White; 8% Asian; 31% Latino; and 33% African-American.

Information:

Assessment of access to guns, knowing some who Was killed by gunfire, feeling safe at school, and perceived Future outlook levels were accomplished with Survey of Adolescent Risk Agreement (SSARA) (Caty, 1996). This survey contains 36 items which participants answer either "yes" or "no".

Results and Discussion

Fifty-one percent of the students reported that they had easy access to firearms. Males were significantly more likely to have access (56%) than females (44%), $X^2 = 16.34, p < .001$. African-Americans, Latinos, and Whites were slightly more than twice as likely to have access to guns than Asians (56% to 25%, $X^2 (3) = 21.04, p < .001$, Phi Cramer's $V = .191, p < .001$. These students were almost four times more likely to have experimented with drugs or alcohol (79% to 21%, $X^2 = 36.56, p < .001$). Interestingly, those students reporting that they have access to weapons were significantly less likely to report that they engage in physical fights (45% to 55%, $X^2 = 26.54, p < .001$).

Forty-nine percent of the students reported that they knew someone who had been killed by gunfire. No significant gender differences were reported (52% for males and 47% for females, $X^2 = 1.344, p = .246$). There was a significant ethnic difference, Phi Cramer's $V = .423, p < .001$. African-Americans and Latinos were twice as likely to have known someone killed by gunfire than Whites and Asians (63% to 26%, $X^2 = 16.45, p < .001$). These students were twice as likely to report that they perceived their future prospects as poor (8% to 4%, $X^2 = 12.24, p < .001$) and were twice as likely to report that they did not feel safe at school (24% to 12%, $X^2 = 13.76, p < .001$). Surprisingly, those students who reported knowing someone killed were no more likely to have ever been in counseling than those who did not report knowing someone killed by a gunfire, ($X^2 = .728, p = .393$).

Further research is needed to assess the external validity of this study. However, in light of the pervasive access to guns and the psychological effects of knowing someone killed with a firearm, this study suggests that "safe" high schools are no longer immune to the devastating effects of the gun culture.

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