

DIVISION 15 OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION PRESENTS

REDUCING WEAPONS IN SCHOOLS

A RESEARCH BRIEF FOR POLICY MAKERS

BY DR. RON AVI ASTOR & DR. RAMI BENBENISHTY

Almost 90 percent of California High Schools have students reporting seeing a weapon on campus during the academic year. About 31 percent of schools have at least 8 percent or higher of students reporting being threatened by weapons on school grounds. Large-scale historical and contemporary data suggest that weapons are present in schools far more than policymakers, the public, and even many school safety researchers realize, and that their presence is adversely affecting many students and teachers. This brief summarizes the results from an analysis of data from more than half a million students in California showing that many high school students have been affected each year by weapons on school grounds, either by bringing a weapon, being threatened by a weapon, or seeing a weapon while at school. Weapons on school grounds can have negative emotional, physical and even lethal effects on victims and witnesses. Policies addressing these events at all levels are absent and needed.

Note: This is an official statement of Division 15 (Educational Psychology) of the American Psychological Association, and does not represent the position of American Psychological Association or any of its other Divisions or subunits.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT WEAPONS IN SCHOOLS:

SOME BACKGROUND

The prevalence, meaning, and impact of the presence of weapons on school grounds for students, teachers, and families go far beyond publicized mass shootings.

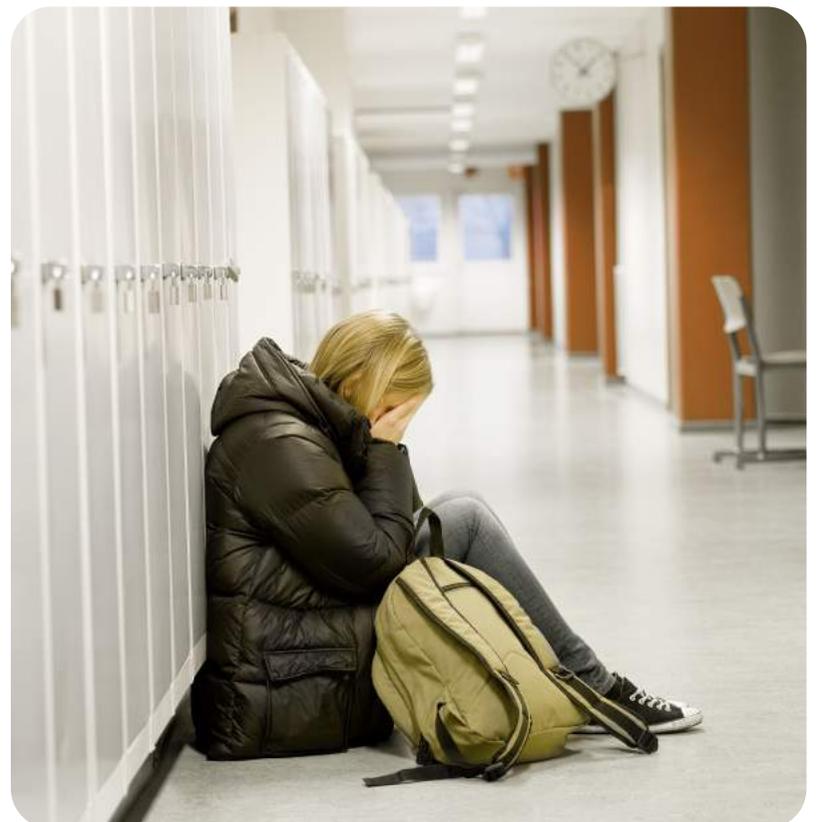
Firearm deaths in schools, although tragic and devastating, are extremely rare, compared with deaths in other settings, such as neighborhoods and public spaces.

Weapons in school can cause students severe short- and long-term social, academic, and psychological harm, even if a weapon is never actively used.

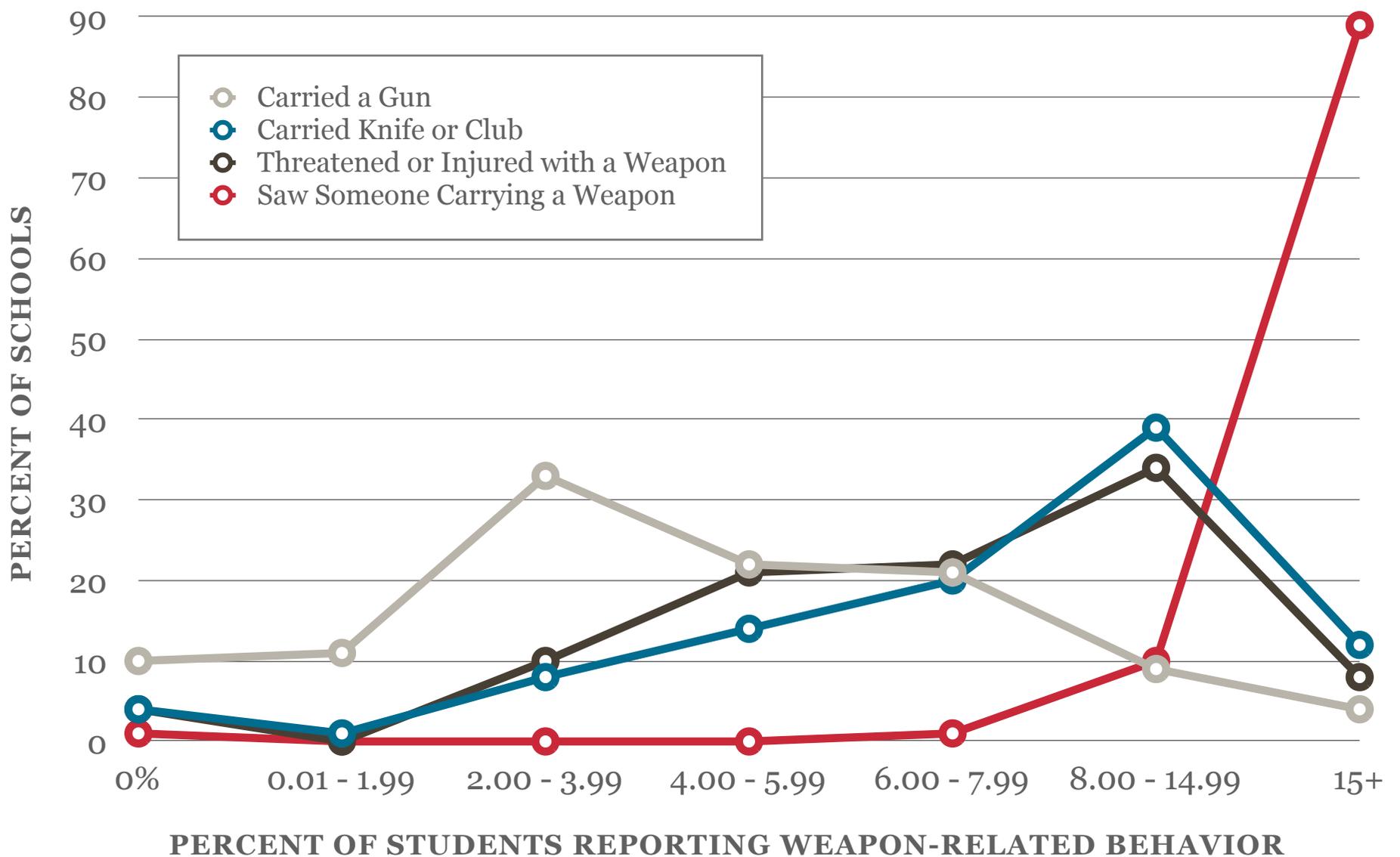
The too narrow focus on lethal use of guns in schools and on mass shootings **may lead to unproductive policies and interventions that could have unintended negative consequences.** For example, 'hardening schools', employing police on campus, and 'arming' staff, may magnify the harmful effects of zero tolerance policies and further contribute to the 'school to prison pipeline'.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS:

In California alone, 4% of students reported bringing a gun to school, 8% reported bringing a knife, and 6.8% reported they were threatened or injured with a gun, knife, or a club. Additionally, 23.3% *saw* a gun, knife, or other weapon on school grounds. That is, in any given year, almost a quarter of all secondary school students in California—representing more than half a million students—have seen, been threatened by, or brought a weapon to school. Nationwide, millions of students each year may have such experiences with weapons in schools. In California, weapons are present in many schools, with very high rates of weapons in a small number of schools.



DISTRIBUTION OF THE PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOLS INVOLVED IN WEAPON-RELATED BEHAVIOR



The figure shows that in 10.2% of secondary schools there were *no reports* by students that they had carried a gun to school, and that only in 3.3% of schools, 15% or more of the students reported that they had done so. However, in almost 40% of schools, between 8%-15% of students reported carrying a knife or club to school, and in almost 90% of schools, 15% or more of the students reported seeing a weapon in school. **School safety policy in the U.S. and worldwide does not address these situations.**

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

Policy and practice should reflect a “public health” prevention approach that supports and strengthens the educational mission of schools in a democratic and just society. Rather than transforming schools into armed fortresses, a large body of research points to the effectiveness of policies that are comprehensive, preventative, and that encourage positive social emotional outcomes for students.

1 Policies concerning weapons and safety should have a wide scope, and should:

- address all types of weapons, not only guns;
- go beyond fatal shootings to encompass a wide range of weapon-related behaviors, including carrying a weapon, threatening with a weapon, and even witnessing a student carrying a weapon;
- pertain to all members of the school community, not only to students as perpetrators or victims (e.g., educators, administrative staff, parents, bystanders, and the community).



2 Policies should incorporate a public health prevention approach that includes:



- a universal approach that aims at preventing weapons in all schools;
- a targeted component for the small number of schools with very high levels of weapon-related behaviors;
- a statewide data collection and analysis infrastructure (e.g., anonymous student surveys in all schools) to support policy development and ongoing monitoring of key outcomes.

3 Policies should aim to promote supportive educational climates in schools rather than confining and punitive environments, and should:

- facilitate a positive school climate that includes both teacher support and fair and consistent rules and disciplinary practices;
- establish fair and consistent discretion in responding to weapon-related events, considering factors such as the gravity of the offense, recidivism, and mitigating circumstances;
- ensure opportunities to reintegrate students expelled or transferred to alternative schools back into their home district schools, to disrupt the school to prison pipeline;
- complement disciplinary actions with local monitoring of school responses that should consider student and family characteristics (e.g., poverty, special needs, minority status) and the circumstances of triggering events, to ensure social justice, fairness and consistency;
- incorporate students' voice concerning essential information on their experiences, needs, suggestions, and feedback on policies;
- instate multi-level professional development regarding key issues, such as responses to threats, sharing student information, and student discipline;
- develop collaborative accountability for action from the leadership in districts, regions, state, and local school boards.



This brief is based on two longer *published chapters*: a. Astor, R.A., & Benbenishty, R. (2019). *Bullying, school violence, and climate in evolving contexts: Culture, organization and time*. Chapter 5. New York: Oxford University Press, and b. Benbenishty, R., & Astor, R. A. (in press). Proposed policies to reduce weapons in schools: Based on research from an ecological conceptual model. In J. G. Dwyer (Ed.): *Oxford Handbook of Children and the Law*. New York: Oxford University Press. [Access Chapter 5, cited above, here](#).



Learn More

Delve deeper into this topic (and data-backed opportunities to improve school safety) in a special APA Division 15 podcast episode with Dr. Ron Avi Astor:

www.EdPsych.us/WeaponsInSchools

Please direct questions and media inquiries to:

Ron Avi Astor
University of Southern California, Los Angeles
ron.astor@gmail.com

or

Rami Benbenishty
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
ramibenben@gmail.com