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Guns in School: Why Allowing Firearms at Schools Will Keep Them Safe

The day of April 20, 1999, left a scar on American culture that will not soon be forgotten. On that morning in Littleton, Colorado, two students walked into Columbine High School with a plan to kill. Their names were Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, and together they carried “four guns and more than thirty homemade bombs” (Kleck 1447). In only 49 minutes, they murdered twelve students and one teacher, wounded two dozen other individuals, and finally committed suicide (1447). This bloodbath was not an act taken on impulse but a premeditated execution that the two students had planned for over a year (1451).

School shootings, such as the Columbine tragedy, continually prompt debate over how to handle the issue of gun control and the presence of guns in schools. Two camps offer their arguments to this dispute. Gun rights advocates argue that guns should be allowed in school while gun control advocates insist that schools must remain gun-free. Currently, on federal and state levels, laws exist that prohibit the carrying of firearms in school zones; however, it is specifically because of such laws that school shootings occur. The prohibition of guns in schools leaves school campuses vulnerable to attack. American schools are left unprotected and helpless whereas the presence of licensed gun-carriers could stop an attacker from killing or even deter the attacker from assaulting a school in the first place. Laws should permit legally licensed and trained individuals to carry guns in school; at the same time, people must be mindful of the responsibility and implications of carrying and firing a weapon, even defensively.

To fully understand why the presence of guns at school can reduce violence, one must first view the issue from a historical perspective. For “most of America’s history” (Kopel 518), no laws prohibited the carrying of guns in schools. According to Kopel, “It was not uncommon for students to bring guns to school, stored in their lockers or automobiles, to use for hunting or target shooting after school” (518). The banning of guns on school grounds is a relatively new development in American legislature, occurring primarily over the last few decades.

School environments have changed drastically in recent history. A wide majority of states and school supervisors have prohibited the presence of guns on campuses. At the federal level, Congress passed the Gun-Free School Zone Act (GFSZA) in 1990 and then a revised version in 1996 after the Supreme Court overruled the original law. The GFSZA banned firearms in school zones of K-12 schools (Kopel 518-19), but it does not, affect K-12 schools on private property or higher education institutions. Therefore, anyone with a permit for a gun could legally carry his or her weapon on a university or private school’s property if the state or school itself has not banned firearms at the school in question (519). Thus, regulations exist at the federal, state, and school administration levels, which bar the carrying of guns in school zones. If these governing bodies lifted the ban on guns at schools, the safety of the schools would increase drastically. The idea that gun-free necessarily equals safe is a persistent but fallible mindset in modern American culture. This perspective is a dangerous one; a gun-free location is only a target for criminals.

American history itself reveals that school shootings occurred much less often before gun bans were in place. If responsible, licensed gun-carrying individuals protect the school, the mere knowledge that they are carrying weapons might be enough to deter a rogue student from assaulting the school. Prior to 1995, teachers were permitted to carry guns in schools in many states (Lott). In fact, before 1990, America had only witnessed seven school shootings in its

entire “214-year history” (Kopel 519). School shootings increased greatly only after Congress enacted the GFSZA, and individual states and schools set up their own bans. According to Kopel, in the short seventeen years after the appearance of gun bans, there were a total of seventy-eight school shootings (519).

Gun control advocates, however, do not believe that allowing guns in schools would decrease shootings; they anticipate that the presence of guns in schools would increase such violence. In order to make their arguments and attempt to refute their opposition, advocates of gun control rely on a logic that emphasizes the danger of guns. Some gun control advocates are personal witnesses or survivors of such tragedies and desperately want society to find a solution that will prevent rogue students from committing these atrocities to others in the future. They argue for stricter limitations on gun availability in pursuit of this ideal end; however, their logic fails to consider certain aspects of the issue, such as the different ways that rogue students obtain guns and the nature of societies where guns are available. When reviewed with close scrutiny, the foundation of their beliefs proves to be unsupported.

Gun control advocates believe that the presence of more guns necessarily equals more violence. Therefore, under this logic, they argue that keeping guns out of schools and making gun control laws stricter overall will reduce violence in school. Bill Smith, who taught at Thurston High School when a shooting occurred there in May of 1998, argues emotionally on the subject in the article he wrote with McMorris. While his emotion is certainly valid due to the personal nature of the issue, he lets his emotion lead him to make assumptions on the relationship between students and guns. Smith claims that “[societies] with extremely accessible firearms” will unavoidably experience “deadly violence” (11). He also insists that “it should be obvious that legislation decreasing kids’ exposure to guns will positively affect the safety of ...

schools” and lists several changes he believes should be made to gun control laws (11). These include intensifying the punishments for those who sell or give firearms to minors, “[holding] gun owners responsible” if juveniles steal their weapons and use them unlawfully, and forcing “background checks and waiting periods” on anyone attempting to buy a weapon (11). Without including supporting evidence for his claims, he asserts that students who cannot obtain weapons from parents or by illegal measures will be “less likely” to cause school shootings (11).

It appears that, in at least some cases, gun control advocates argue from a perspective of fear about the danger of guns rather than from an informed and rational foundation. Smith exhibits this in his contention that the availability of guns automatically leads to violence. In the article, “Students v Guns,” students and faculty who have similarly argued against allowing guns in schools admit that “the idea frighten[s] them” (40).

Societies with high levels of guns are not necessarily violent ones. For instance, Switzerland, a country with “more firepower per person than any other country in the world” and loose gun control laws, has never had a school massacre, despite the fact that “kids and guns mix freely” there (McMorris and Smith 40). In fact, Switzerland overall has fewer burglaries and homicides than England, even though gun control laws in England are very strict (McMorris and Smith 40). The idea that the prevalence of guns leads to high violence rates is factually unfounded. Furthermore, making gun control laws stricter will not stop rogue students from obtaining weapons. According to Chapman, “most of these spectacular episodes are so freakish that they are not amenable to regulatory solutions” (73). That is, a student who is so determined to harm others will not be afraid of taking risks to obtain firearms, regardless of any laws that attempt to keep him from getting the weapons or threaten harsh consequences for doing so. For instance, shooters often obtain or steal guns from parents or other adults (Chapman 73-4; Kleck

1454). In the case of a shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota in 2005, a 16-year old murdered his grandfather in order to steal two guns from him (Chapman 72-74). School shootings often end in the suicide of the shooter, as in the Columbine event (Kleck 1447), the student firing the weapon would have no fear of the repercussions of his actions.

Another failure of gun control laws appears in the fact that sometimes student shooters do obtain their guns through legal methods. Kleck states that Harris and Klebold, the students who fired on Columbine, had a “legally eligible” individual purchase guns for them several months before their attack on the school—although, when the shooting finally took place in April 1999, Harris was old enough to legally buy a gun himself (1452). Additionally, in two shootings that occurred in Pearl, Mississippi, and Springfield, Oregon, the shooters used weapons they possessed legally (1452). The question to consider at this point is this: if just a few legal, gun-owning individuals are malicious enough to break the law by bringing guns to school and firing on students and faculty, why make it illegal for responsible gun owners to bring their firearms to school to protect it from such individuals?

Maintaining the ban of guns in schools will leave schools vulnerable, and school massacres will continue to take place. American law at the federal and state levels should allow legally licensed and trained individuals to possess firearms on school grounds so that responsible gun owners can defend schools from attackers. Although gun control advocates argue that the presence of guns necessarily equals violence, statistics from both American history and other cultures suggests that violence actually decreases in societies with a high availability of guns. While not all schools should be expected to immediately allow guns on their property, if at least some schools permitted students and faculty to carry guns, parents could decide for themselves what kind of protection they want their children to have.

The debate over gun control and whether guns should be permitted in schools is a critical one as the legislative decisions made in response to it could have serious consequences in terms of lives saved or lost. Because of this, the gun control debate is especially important to consider from a Christian perspective. As a creation of God, human life is infinitely valuable—and this applies to every human being, both those who could be victims of school shootings and the shooters themselves. The Bible asserts the value of human life many times, from the beginning of Genesis when God “[made] man in [his] image” (*New King James Version*, Gen. 1.26) to the infinite love that God expressed towards humanity by sending his Son to earth to die (John 3.16).

In an interview with Regent professor, Ruth-Anne Wideman, she shared that she has mixed feelings about the idea of guns being allowed in schools, but she has a strong conviction about how to view guns from the perspective of her faith. She asserts the need to have a “healthy regard for guns”—that is, a complete understanding of the value of human life and what it means to pull the trigger. According to Wideman, when someone fires on another human being, the shooter does not “know the state of [that being’s] soul;” that person could pass into “eternity” right then because of the actions of the shooter (Wideman). Therefore, Christians, and people in general, must be mindful of the deeper meaning behind this controversial issue. This applies even more so to those who are gun owners themselves, who have the potential to, as Wideman puts it, “determine someone’s death date”—a decision that not everyone could, or should, be able to make.

The Bible is clear about how God feels about murder: “He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death” (Exod. 21.12). However, the Bible also expresses a need to respond to the violence of others appropriately: “But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die” (Exod. 21.

14). Therefore, people must respect both the need to preserve life and the need to put a stop to evil actions. If a malicious individual enters a building and starts firing at innocent civilians, and a responsible gun owner has an opportunity to shoot him, that civilian should not only value the lives of the innocents but also the life of the shooter. In an instance like this when one has to make a “quick judgment call” (Wideman) about how to best preserve life, having a strong understanding of human worth will help one respond appropriately. Perhaps the person could talk the attacker down or intimidate the attacker with his own weapon—or maybe the only way to stop him would be to shoot him. Every circumstance is different. Whether a person is the one wielding the gun, the representative voting on gun control legislation, or the parent choosing to send his children to a school that permits or prohibits weapons, he or she must recognize the implications of his or her actions in light of God’s desires for humanity.

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