

Pistol Packing Teachers: What do Students Think?

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In the wake of highly publicized school shootings, lawmakers have proposed a number of alternative school security measures intended to thwart mass shootings, including the recommendation that trained teachers and other school staff be allowed to carry concealed handguns on K-12 school campuses. There are currently nine states, including Missouri, that allow school employees other than security personnel to legally carry concealed handguns on school properties.

While some legislators and supporters continue to advocate for arming teachers, little is known about students' attitudes towards this policy. Given that students are directly impacted by this school safety strategy, it is important to understand their support for arming teachers and the extent to which different factors influence their view on this issue. In this fact sheet we examine students' support for arming teachers and how this varies by student characteristics.

Students' Support for Arming Teachers

We had the unique opportunity to assess students' opinions about arming teachers during the third wave of data collection for the UMSL Comprehensive School Safety Initiative. Students were asked, "Should teachers be allowed to carry guns at school?" As seen in Table 1, the vast majority of the 2,645 students who answered this questions (80%) do not support the arming of teachers, and only 20% support the idea of arming teachers.

Table 1. Students' Support for Arming Teachers (n=2645)

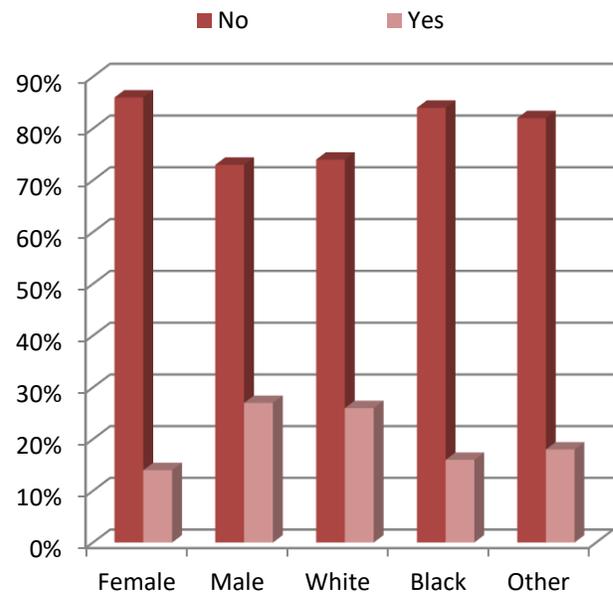
No	80%
Yes	20%

To what extent, if any, does student support for arming teachers vary by race and sex? Figure 1 indicates that males are almost twice as likely as females to support arming teachers.

White students are more supportive (26%) than are black (16%) students and those of other racial/ethnic (18%) backgrounds. We should emphasize that while there are some differences in levels of support for arming teachers, around 75% or more of each subgroup do NOT support allowing teachers to carry guns at school.

Students' Feelings of Safety

Figure 1. Support for Arming Teachers by Sex and Race (n=2528)



One objective of the proposed policy of allowing teachers to carry weapons at school is to increase school safety and students' perceptions of safety. Research has found school climate (including perceptions of safety) is related to students' educational outcomes. Yet, it is not clear that target hardening policies increase perceptions of safety. For instance, strategies such as metal detectors and security officers can increase students' level of mistrust and fear, although this research is mixed.

To assess whether arming teachers would have a positive or negative impact on students' perceptions of safety, students were asked the extent to which their feelings of safety might change if teachers in their school were allowed to carry guns. Response categories ranged from 1 (a lot more safe) to 5 (a lot less safe). As seen in Table 2, about 23% of students indicate they would feel safer if their teachers were armed, approximately a quarter of students indicate no change in their feelings of safety, and a little over half of students would feel less safe.

Table 2. Students' Feelings of Safety in School as a Result of Arming Teachers (n=2676)

A lot/Somewhat safer	23%
No difference	26%
A lot/Somewhat less safe	51%

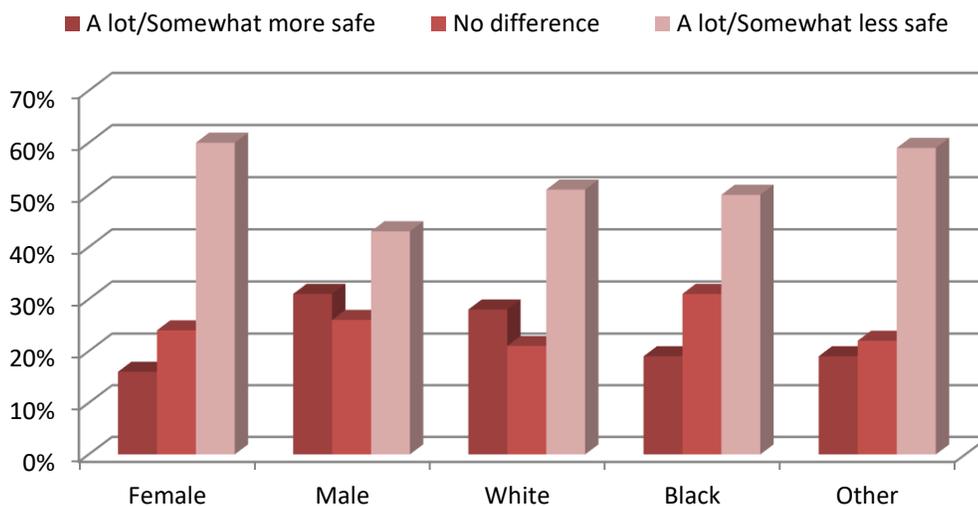
Next we examine whether students' feelings of safety as a result of arming teachers vary by sex or race. Figure 2 reveals that 60% of female students would feel less safe if their teachers were allowed to carry guns at school. Males were more positive in their assessment of the policy, with 43% indicating they would feel less safe while 31% would feel safer. As for race, 28% of white students and 19% of black students report that they would feel safer if their teachers were armed. Approximately half of white (51%), black (50%) and other racial/ethnic groups (59%) indicated they would feel less safe if the policy was introduced.

Conclusion

Fear of school shooting incidents continues to influence school safety reform. The idea of arming teachers and other school personnel first gained national attention following the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Six years later, efforts to arm teachers were revisited in the aftermath of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida when a state-appointed commission investigating the incident recommended that trained teachers be allowed to carry concealed handguns on K-12 campuses. However, the panel also recommended that each district adopt this policy based on their own unique needs, including existing security measures, proximity of police, and acceptance of the school community.

This fact sheet demonstrates that most students in the St. Louis County school districts are not only against this policy but the majority of students report they would feel LESS safe if teachers were armed. These findings suggest that arming teachers may have negative effects on the school environment and on students' feelings of safety at school. Moving forward, we encourage individual districts to assess how arming teachers will affect their students before adopting a policy that may have unintended, negative consequences.

Figure 2. Distribution of Students' Feelings of Safety in School as a Result of Arming Teachers by Sex and Race (n=2528)



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