



From the Editor

Judy A. Rollins, PhD, RN

A Reason for Hope: Most School Shootings Are Preventable

Although most students will never experience a shooting at their school, children are experiencing gun violence in school at increasing rates. According to a database developed and maintained by John Woodrow Cox, *The Washington Post* enterprise reporter and author of *Children Under Fire: An American Crisis*, and Steven Rich, database editor for the investigations unit, in 2000, fewer than 10,000 children had experienced gun violence in their school; in 2022, the figure escalated to 43,450 (Cox & Rich, 2023).

With this news, it is easy to become discouraged. Cox and Rich (2023) reflected on data from the 366 separate incidents of school gun violence they studied, along with dozens of stories on the damaged children it represents; they believe there are reasons to remain hopeful, none more so than that *most school shootings are preventable*.

What Do We Know about School Shooters?

The notion that there is an archetype school shooter is false. However, we do know shooters at schools are typically students, and most school shooters seek specific targets.

The three youngest individuals in Cox and Rich's database are 6 years old; the oldest is 74 years old, a substitute teacher in Alabama who brought a handgun to a first-grade class and unintentionally fired it in his pocket, injuring a student.

Many shooters share similar attributes. Their median age is 16 years, and 96% are male. Most intend to harm specific people, and the overwhelming majority show no signs of debilitating mental illness, such as psychosis or schizophrenia. Race almost always reflects the campus's population, with White shooters firing in predominantly White schools, and Black shooters firing in predominantly Black schools. Children of color are much more likely to experience school gun violence, more than twice as much for Hispanic students and over three times as much for Black students.

Although most of the worst incidents are carried out with semi-automatic rifles or shotguns, among cases where authorities identified the weapon, a single handgun is the weapon of choice 80% of the time (Cox & Rich, 2023). Where did young shooters obtain them? According to Cox and Rich (2023):

Young would-be shooters rarely bought firearms on the street or stole them from strangers' cars or houses,

Rollins, J.A. (2023). A reason for hope: Most school shootings are preventable. *Pediatric Nursing*, 49(2), 57-58.

because they didn't need to. In 86% of the cases we examined, the children found the guns in the homes of their friends, relatives, or parents. (p. A6)

Preventing Shootings in Schools

Over the years, many prevention strategies have been recommended, and some of them implemented. For example, "More gun laws. More armed guards. More metal detectors. More cameras. More bulletproof windows. More drills. More suspensions. More therapists. More prayers. More guns" (Cox & Rich, 2023, p. A6).

Schools have pretty much been on their own to figure out what might work for them. As a result, an entire industry has evolved peddling products that most vendors to date have been unable to prove have saved lives. One strategy, the active shooter drill, has caused deep and long-lasting trauma for many children.

However, Cox and Rich (2023) suggest some simple straightforward steps communities can take that could possibly, substantially reduce the number of deaths:

1. Ensure every school can quickly lock its doors. This includes locks to secure classroom doors from inside the classroom.
2. Encourage reporting of tips to stop potential attackers before they reach campus; many people do know because shooters tend to talk about their plans. Five years ago, Sandy Hook Promise (2023) launched the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System, which allows people to privately submit safety concerns through a computer, phone, or app. To date, the system has prevented at least 13 planned school shootings, more than 100 other acts of potential campus violence, and at least 406 child suicides.
3. Develop strategies that target the population responsible for 74% of school shooting deaths since 1999. Although people of any age or gender can bring a gun to school and fire it, males between 15 and 20 years of age are by far the most dangerous.
4. Hold people responsible whose negligence allows children to obtain their guns in the first place. Since 1999, only 10 adult gun owners have been criminally charged for failing to lock up their firearms.

What Can Pediatric Nurses Do?

At our last Editorial Board Meeting, the *Pediatric Nursing* Editorial Board identified gun violence as one of the most important issues of our time. We discussed how being educated about this challenging topic is not enough. We, as nurses, also need to know what to do with this information and how to make our voices heard.

Therefore, I am delighted to announce the launch of our timely new series, "Nursing Power through Advocacy." In this issue of *Pediatric Nursing* (see p. 98) and in the months to come, Ann Sheehan, DNP, CPNP, FAANP, Assistant Dean for Practice and Associate Professor, Michigan State University College of Nursing, will lead us through the critical steps we can take to help end this horrific epidemic.

We hope you will join us. ■■■

References

- Cox, J., & Rich, S. (2023, February 14). After Parkland: What we've learned tracking school shootings for 5 years. *The Washington Post*, A1, A6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/02/14/school-shootings-parkland-5th-anniversary/>
- Sandy Hook Promise. (2023). *The say something-anonymous reporting system*. <https://www.sandyhookpromiselearning.org/say-something-ars>