

## Review of *Focusing on School Safety After Parkland*

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### Summary of Review

The Heritage Foundation's recent report, *Focusing on School Safety After Parkland*, was published following the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The report highlights a handful of cherry-picked, pro-gun research but depends mainly on anecdotal evidence to support its findings that teachers should be armed, schools hardened, family and social services expanded, and discriminatory discipline practices de-emphasized. Yet the report's credibility is harmed by the limited and biased presentation of research evidence and the omission of educator and student perspectives. The problems with supporting research and the questionable methods prevent generalizability and call the paper's usefulness into question. The end result is a poorly refereed, one-sided defense of positions taken by gun advocates. That said, the report does provide conservative perspectives that can serve as a springboard for broader discussions about the impact of value-laden policies on promoting a broader sense of safety in schools.

### I. Introduction

The Heritage Foundation's recent publication *Focusing on School Safety After Parkland* provides perspectives on the response to and prevention of school shootings. While it presents itself as research that reviewed and analyzed earlier studies, it rests its primary findings and conclusions on a limited set of anecdotes that do not include the voices of students or educators.

The report's authors argue for more guns in schools and criticize the Obama administration's efforts to stop discriminatory discipline practices in schools. The report appears in the wake of the mass shooting incident at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland on February 14, 2018. Incidentally, the release occurred just days before the national "March for our Lives" events that sought to increase public awareness and discourse around the topic of guns and school safety.

The Heritage Foundation is a think tank dedicated to research and marketing of policies based on principles of "free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense."<sup>1</sup> In advocating for these principles the report's authors question the effectiveness of gun-free zones, promote school safety in part by equipping teachers with firearms, and resisting gun reform. While there is no shortage of cherry-picked statistics in this report, perspectives of both educators and students are

absent. *Focusing on School Safety After Parkland* is a lengthy, unapologetic and partisan essay that takes some liberty within a newsletter format to escape the trappings of actual qualitative research. The report's authors declare their "approach" as being "fact-based, practical, and holistic" (p. 1) for the prevention of school violence while also protecting gun ownership and constitutional rights. One section is described, in part, as "An *Analysis of School Safety in America*." This and others are informative for the mélange of facts, figures, and curiosities that have been cobbled together for the intended audience which includes both policymakers and the academic community.

## II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report's authors advocate for policies grounded in the second amendment and that protect individual rights of gun ownership. To this end, they make several recommendations. First, the authors suggest more police or teachers with guns in schools as a method of decreasing response time to active shootings. Second, enhance school infrastructure to protect students from active threats "without creating a prison-like environment" (p. 13). Third, provide training to and allocate resources among schools and a network of community supports for increased availability to school counselors, nurses, psychologists and coordination of mental health services. Fourth, implement "red flag" laws to take guns away from those that might be a danger to themselves or others. Lastly, the authors advance a somewhat vague notion of promoting awareness of factors relating to youth violence like importance of intact family units, "removing barriers to educational and economic success, and allowing schools to punish student misbehavior effectively without the fear of losing federal funding" (p.13).

## III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

One suggestion the report makes is to shorten the response time to the attack. Citing studies showing law enforcement response times, the authors propose increasing resources by increasing law enforcement presence in schools and promoting policies that permit teachers and school staff to carry concealed weapons. This suggestion operates on the premise that law enforcement will be quicker if they are onsite. They also argue anecdotally that the presence of firearms at a school might create a less appealing target for attackers.

The authors oppose most other fairly popular notions of gun reform such as increasing the minimum age to purchase a gun. Their report suggests that increasing the age requirement for gun purchases will not save lives because many young people will access guns through alternative pathways including family or friends. Moreover, a ban of assault rifles means that other guns like handguns could be used to perpetuate attacks. They contest the assumption that banning one model of gun will only create a whack-a-mole market. Similarly, the authors contend that banning non-assault weapons with multiple magazines can be as lethal as assault weapons. They go on to state that while many attackers have used assault rifles others have used handguns with similarly devastating effects.

Instead of limiting the supply of guns, the authors, who are notably from an organization

which values a strong national defense, see a need to fortify schools as a viable solution. They offer suggestions to bolster school infrastructure such as using bulletproof glass, providing safe-rooms, and installing security cameras with the intention of not “turning classrooms into prisons” (p. 9). However, they provide no ideas on how to make this a reality.

The findings and conclusions around enhancing mental health is a kitchen sink approach appealing for more money and resources for integrative networks of health services at schools. For example, they discuss one of the studies they “analyzed” for the report how broken families and disruptive home lives affect student well-being and then describe a profile of a school shooter (absent support). It is suggested that absent fathers negatively impact child development and suggest to readers that it be considered a risk factor for school shootings. As the authors explain, many school attackers are from broken homes.

The writers do submit a proposal for taking guns from risky folks through the creation and enforcement of so-called “red flag” laws. These laws are a suggested method of disarming gun owners who might be a danger to themselves or others. Getting weapons out of the hands of individuals is one way the authors believe would prevent school shootings.

Discriminatory discipline in schools was a concern of the Obama administration that the authors wish to turn back. By “allowing schools to punish student misbehavior effectively,” the authors suggest a de-emphasis on these Obama-era concerns. The rationale is that a policy environment that scrutinizes disciplinary actions of school officials will lead to wrongful and possibly violent actions going unpunished.

#### **IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature**

The authors support their ideas with a lengthy collection of endnotes, many of which are weakened by overreliance on secondary sources or opinion editorials. The catalog of carefully picked studies is not the only weakness of the report. The extant literature consists of a long list of endnotes which are often mini-essays on related topics. Notably, only brief mention is made of empirical research and no mention of positions contrary to the pro second amendment theme. In addition, differing opinions and views have not been reported from organizations such as the National Education Association that takes a strong and clear stance on gun reform. Mental health is cited as an area of focus but limited research is included in the report from agencies like the American School Counselor Association that develop position papers addressing issues impacting student mental health. Absent from the report are student voices to offer their perspective of the status of school safety from lived experiences.

#### **V. Review of The Report’s Methods**

Methodologically, the report is weak and unclear. After some reading, it becomes clear the authors conducted a meta-analysis of the published research on the topic of “school shootings: but only studies in which the findings supported their conclusions are cited. It is difficult to consider this as empirical research given the weaknesses of the design strategies. Very bothersome is that little distinction is made between which suggestions are arrived at through speculation and which indicate data-based conclusions. For instance, the claim that

gun-free zones cause gun violence is suspect in the absence of reasonable empirical support. Also, the authors highlight a particular study correlating economic factors with the rise of gun violence in schools for the purpose of drawing conclusions about common shooter characteristics. Some may see claims like this as irresponsible, particularly when they emanate from a study that has little to no methodological rigor.

While the authors seek clarity and accuracy regarding the threats facing schools they parse data and narrowly define “school shooting” which, arguably, tries to draw the discussion away from school safety. The report provides readers with insights into interagency differences in definitions and hence statistics on gun violence at schools. For instance, “Everytown for Gun Safety,” a non-profit group that works to prevent gun violence, considers a school shooting “any time a firearm discharges a live round inside a school building or on a school campus or grounds”. The authors characterize this as an “extremely broad” definition and instead favor one that limits guns used only to “harm students or staff during school hours but also exclude suicides.” This later definition deflates the numbers by excluding accidental or non-injury gun incidents at school, shootings occurring afterschool, and excluding on-campus suicides. Such a definition promotes a particular narrative that apparently attempts to direct policy away from broader gun reform.

Interestingly, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) does not disaggregate gun usage when tracking violent student deaths at schools, but includes a myriad of additional metrics such as nonfatal student and teacher victimizations and measures of school bullying. On this last indicator, findings in a 2016 report show about 21 percent of students aged 12-18 report being bullied at school. The authors do acknowledge that gang violence and bullying are issues facing students during school and each “is certainly important in its own right and in some cases can have profound and long-lasting negative impacts that rival those of school shootings” (p. 3). This admission raises suspicion about the authors’ conclusion that infrequent mass shootings and unlikelihood of violent death at schools are by themselves enough to consider schools as being viewed as “safe.” In light of the bullying statistics, further explication is needed not to define school shootings but to determine what is meant by *safety*. Any definition of value must consider absence of physical victimization and also psychological threat.

## VI. Validity of Findings and Conclusions

As Pyrczak<sup>3</sup> suggests, the validity of the report is determined by its plausibility, credibility, trustworthy, and defensibility. The content in the report indicates the authors’ bias. They do not address plausible rival explanations when making causal assumptions about gun-free zones and, as a result, the report’s validity is diminished. While a number of different school shootings are named in the report, generalizability to other incidents might be problematic. In seeking a universal theory of or common profile of school shooters, unique factors or regional differences are neglected. The authors have selected an important public health issue and do offer conservative perspectives; however, educators’ and students’ perspectives are notably absent from the report. Without a thorough and even-handed examination of causes and effects about potential drawbacks and real costs of policy for arming teachers

this conclusion should be rejected.

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

The report's authors advocate for certain common-sense approaches such as school psychological services, family interventions and safety precautions; however, the defense of the second amendment, teachers carrying weapons and the like illustrate the underlying ideological principles of the report. While the authors genuinely aim to prevent "devastating school violence" and protect life by being "fact-based, practical, and holistic," the suggestions advanced appear paradoxical and problematic. For instance, the argument to abolish gun-free zones appears to place individual gun owner values before communities in favor of gun-free areas. The report should not be used to guide policies and practice though it is marketed to policymakers. A truly holistic strategy will require additional research and a critical reflexive approach to determine shared values. As too often, a one-sided, and somewhat stubborn argument around the second amendment will stall the kind of discussions and decisions about safety in schools; ignoring all other variables in between that likely has a greater propensity for perpetuating violence in schools.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Kim, R. (2017). Review of “*Gender Identity Policies in Schools: What Congress, the Courts, and the Trump Administration Should Do.*” Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved 24 March 2018, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-gender>

<sup>2</sup>Malcolm, J., & Swearer, A. (2018). *Focusing on School Safety After Parkland*. The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved 3 April 2018, from <https://www.heritage.org/firearms/report/focusing-school-safety-after-parkland>

<sup>3</sup>Pyrczak, F., & Bruce, R. R. (2005). *Evaluating research in academic journals: a practical guide to realistic evaluation*. Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Pub