

School Shootings: Critique of a Measurement System

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Introduction

Gun violence in schools is nothing new. The first recorded school shooting occurred in 1840 when a law professor was gunned down on the campus of the University of Virginia. (Rosenwald, 2018). As I stated in my forum post, I am an educator and this topic is very important to me. However, more importantly, this topic is important to me because I am a parent of three amazing children (a high schooler, a graduate student, and Graphic Arts teacher) that are all tied to some type of school system. It is probably for these reasons that the topic of school shooting data has been too frightening for me to look at and analyze until this assignment.

Definition of School Shooting

As I began this research journey I naively assumed that the definition of school shooting would be straightforward and easy. However, what I very quickly discovered is that finding a consistent, agreed upon definition of school shooting was going to be about as easy to find as a unicorn because it simply does not exist. This fact is going to make looking at the numbers of school shootings in order to determine if they are on the rise very difficult.

It was my assumption that if a gun went off in a school that was a “school shooting”. Well that may be my personal definition of a school shooting that is not necessarily the definition everyone agrees to. In a recent article written by The Washington Post the author claims that school shooting statistics are inflated And that it is not a school shooting every time there is gun fire in a school. (Cox, 2018) While that may be my personal definition, that is not necessarily the

definition everyone agrees on. Mr. Cox goes on to cite an example of a man that completed suicide using a handgun outside of a school. This, in his opinion, should not be counted as a school shooting and therefore should not be included in the data. Others however would argue this point. One such example is the group Everytown for Gun Safety, they would argue that the definition of a school shooting is very clear and should be defined as, “Every time a gun goes on on school grounds it is a school shooting”. (Aiello, 2018)

Accuracy of Data

After researching this topic it is my opinion that the data available in regards to the number of school shootings is not accurate or valid. This lack of validity is simply due to the fact that the people collecting and reporting the data have no consistent definition of what constitutes a school shooting. Therefore, as previously mentioned, what one group counts another group does not count. However, what is evident is that no matter how they are counted school shootings are a problem. In a recent article by Ahmed and Walker there has been at least one school shooting every week in 2018. (2018)

Political Agendas

Gun control and regulations are two of the most highly debated topics in politics. Each time there is a mass shooting in a school the liberals push for gun policies and regulations in an attempt to thwart future incidence and the conservatives push back stating the Second Amendment right to bear arms. This, in turn, results in data being manipulated to meet the needs of their agenda. The fact that there is no uniform definition of school shooting exacerbates this

problem. In my opinion, until politics are taken out of the mix and true data is readily available the problem of having access to valid data will persist.

Measurement Issues

As mentioned many times, the main issue in regards to measuring if school shootings are on the rise lays in the inconsistent definition of school shooting. Obviously, political agendas are also an issue in regards to getting valid data on this topic. Although I suspect this to be the case with any “hot button” issue. Finally, I believe straight up fear is a measurement issue with this topic. It is scary to look at a topic where, in many cases, the lives of innocent children are involved. It is much easier to engage in debates, point fingers, and sling accusations than it is to get to the business of getting accurate data and working together to solve the problem.

Conclusion

Overall there are a couple of things that I found very interesting in researching the topic “Are school shootings are on the rise?”. First, as mentioned above, there are a lot of political factors at play in regards to this topic. While not surprising it does make the system for measuring school shootings very difficult because political factors can play a huge role in how the data is represented.

Secondly, simply finding the data is very difficult. I would suspect it is due to the political factors mentioned above. However, I could not find any data that gave a definitive upward trend in school shootings but there is data available that suggests spikes in 2013, 2014,

and 2015. (King, 2018) Again referring to my forum post answering the question “Are school shootings on the rise?” is not as simple as doing a Google search.

Reference

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