

New study uncovers factors in students' reporting of weapons at school

September 18 2014



Dr. Nadine Connell

As a result of outbreaks of violence in the nation's schools, concerns have grown about school safety and the overall well-being of students.

In a new study, UT Dallas criminology researchers have found that

certain factors affect students' willingness to [report weapons](#) at [school](#).

"A big part of adolescent development is figuring out your identity, and that does not always mean talking to grown-ups about what is going on," said Dr. Nadine Connell, assistant professor of criminology in the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences. "We can't stop students from using weapons if we don't know about the weapons that are actually out there."

The study, published online in *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, used data from anonymous online surveys administered to students in grades 9-12 at 10 schools in a northeastern U.S. state between 2008 and 2011.

Connell, lead author of the study, said the researchers aimed to determine whether reporting behaviors differ by weapon, which factors affect a student's willingness to report weapons at school, and to whom students are most likely to report it.

"Understudied are the ways schools can create positive climates for students to come forward and report various risky behaviors—the utmost concern of which are weapons on campus," said doctoral criminology student Nina Barbieri MS'12, the second author on the study. "We need to know what we can do to make students feel safe at school, as research has found if students do not feel physically or emotionally safe at school, they can become detached and their academic success at risk."

According to the study, 76 percent of students said they would report a knife to a school official, while 88 percent said they would report a gun.

Across both genders, high academic achievement was associated with willingness to report knowledge about guns and knives. A stronger school attachment increased willingness to report a knife.

Approximately 34 percent of students reported seeing or knowing about a weapon in school in the prior three months.

For both genders, previously seeing a weapon on campus decreased the likelihood of reporting a knife. Among males, prior knowledge of a weapon at school was associated with reduced willingness to tell someone about a knife.

Knowledge of school security also played a part in intent to report weapons. Male and female students who knew about at least two security measures were more likely to report guns and knives. Connell said this finding surprised researchers because they didn't know if students paid attention to security measures.

Connell said that the precautions—such as identification badges, locker checks, locked doors and visitor sign-in sheets—were not cost-prohibitive.

"We theorize that the students who knew about the security measures feel safer because they feel like the adults are doing something to keep them safe," she said. "We don't often think about prevention efforts as a joint effort between school administrators and students, but research like this shows students' voices matter. They are the first line of defense to something like the prevention and intervention of weapons."

Most students said they would tell all available authority figures about a gun or knife on campus. Principals and counselors were least likely to be told. Students said they would report weapons mostly to parents and family members.

A small subgroup of students would not tell anyone.

It's encouraging that many students are talking to their parents, Connell

said, but families need a tool to do something with the information, such as a tip line or email address provided by the school.

"We really hope the study is encouraging in that most kids feel that schools are safe, and most kids are going to report something this serious," Connell said. "It's easy to think about the kids who won't, but it's important to support the kids who do."

In a follow-up study, the researchers plan to examine the relationship between weapons and drugs at school and students' willingness to report drugs.

School Weapons Study

Factors associated with students' increased willingness to report guns or knives:

- Attachment to school
- Academic achievement
- Knowledge of [security measures](#)

Factors associated with [students'](#) reduced willingness to report knives:

- Having seen a weapon in the past on campus
- Having prior knowledge of a weapon on campus

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

Citation: New study uncovers factors in students' reporting of weapons at school (2014, September 18) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-uncovers-factors-students-weapons-school.html>

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