

EDITORIAL

Education and the Murdering of Children and Teachers by Guns: What Can We Do?

From January 2009 to May 2018, there have been 288 school shootings in the United States, and in the same period, there were 2 school shootings in Canada. In most countries, there have been none though there have been eight in Mexico, six in South Africa and five in India.

The most recent shooting in the US was at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 children and two teachers were recently killed. In the United Kingdom, there have only been two school shootings in the last 450 years, both in Scotland. The most recent one, about 25 years ago, involved a disturbed adult who attacked a primary school and killed several children. The only other one, 450 years earlier, involved a small group of school children who acquired a gun and shot a person passing by the school.

It has been suggested that in the United States, the bravery of the hundreds of children who died in those 288 schools should be nationally recognized since they have sacrificed their lives for the right of Americans to bear arms, the substance of the Second Amendment in the US constitution. The Canadian situation looks statistically better, though there have been significantly more incidents than one might have thought (actually 19) over the last 140 years in Canadian schools or about one every seven years. Canada has nothing the equivalent of the US Second Amendment, and the acquisition of firearms in Canada is relatively difficult for most purchasers though apparently, when it is difficult a potential murderer can always manage to smuggle a gun in from the United States across the longest "undefended border in the world".

The most devastating school shooting in Canadian history was in 1989 at a Polytechnique institute in Montreal that resulted in 14 women killed and the shooter, who subsequently killed himself. The shooter declared himself to be "anti-feminist" as the grounds for his murders. He seems to have had difficulty getting a place in the school. In the Canadian case, all school shootings, whether at universities, high schools or elementary schools, have been the work of individuals who were able to acquire a devastating weapon.

There does seem to be only a few possible strategies that the society at large and the schools, colleges or universities might adopt to decrease the possibility that this sort of things does not happen again or in their institution. The commonly suggested strategies for preventing the murders of children in schools, whether in Canada or elsewhere are few. First and foremost, make assault weapons and handguns practically impossible to obtain. Second, protect the schools with armed personnel and with many cameras so that one can see centrally when there is someone perhaps dangerous lurking and confront them immediately.

The third suggestion is that we should look to the mental health of people of all ages who might be in a dangerous mood and liable to approach schools with the aim of murdering children and/ or teachers. We do have surveillance of modern social media where such individuals often post their intentions. But the difficulty is how to constrain such individuals before they actually act out their published intentions. And of course, many with intentions do not necessarily post on social media.

Another possibility is that we practice school children and their teachers in coping with a gun-toting murderous individual who appears in or near their classrooms. It is hard to know what, exactly, to practice here. I recall that during the early years after the development of the atomic bomb, perhaps when I was in the fifth or sixth grade, all the children were expected by our teachers to practice getting down under their desks in the event that such a bomb would go off near to them. In fact this seems like a hopeless attempt to cope with such an event.

Would something similar make any sense in the advent of a murderous individual armed with an assault rifle entering a typical elementary or secondary school classroom or even a university one? One supposes that the students would be practiced in overturning their desks in the direction of the shooter. But surely the kinds of weaponry used in most cases would simply penetrate the desks behind which the children might be hiding, thereby wounding or killing the children or perhaps their teachers involved in any event.

Perhaps all of these steps might be of some use, but it seems obvious to me that the prevention of any individual acquiring either handguns or assault weapons is the most important first step. Even if a potential shooter could acquire an ordinary rifle, which would be dangerous enough, it would not permit hundreds of rounds being shot at a classroom or any individual in a school.

So while restricting access completely to assault weapons and handgun is not an educational step to prevent the killing of children/students in schools of every kind, it is certainly a plausible and important step. So please support the removal of assault weapons and handguns from the array of weapons that a would-be killer can use in order to maintain the safety of our children and youth and indeed any of the rest of us that may be ultimately under such threats. Be unafraid to contact your federal members of parliament and your members of your local legislative assembly in the Canadian case. And in other jurisdictions, the same thing would be very helpful.

Are there any educational approaches that might help mitigate this horror? Well perhaps discussion in class at an early age concerning the questions that surround how one handles anger, prejudice or personal unhappiness or imbalance might be a positive early step. Certainly nothing is solved by murdering innocents when one is angry, prejudiced or generally unhappy or depressed. Perhaps one also ought to discuss the proper use of firearms and why they should be restricted of access to most of us most of the time. Children could easily engage in such discussions and it is unlikely that most would conclude that what they really need is an assault rifle or handgun. This might be done in the context of “philosophy for children”, a well-known curricular innovation that is increasingly widely engaged in.

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