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Caught In The Crossfire:

A Report On Gun Violence in Our Nation's Schools

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Center to Prevent Handgun Violence
1225 Eye Street, N.W., Suite 1150
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 289-7319

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A Report on Gun Violence In Our Nation's Schools

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INTRODUCTION

As children across the country return to school this week, they are facing a crisis in education that has reached epidemic proportions -- violence in school. While parents have always worried about their children's education and their abilities to read, write and do basic mathematics, many are also becoming horrified by a new threat. They fear that their children may be severely injured or may not come home from school at all.

Our nation's schools, once thought to be safe havens, have fallen victim to an increase in gun violence, and educators and children are caught in the crossfire. One old, but true education adage goes, "Schools are reflections of their communities." This is particularly true when it comes to gun violence. As the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence worked on this report, one fact became very clear -- if a community suffers from gun violence, its schoolchildren also suffer.

ABSTRACT

This report, "Caught In The Crossfire: A Report on Gun Violence In Our Nation's Schools," focuses on the increasing gun violence occurring in and around our schools. In the past four academic years, beginning in September 1986:

- * At least 71 people - 65 students and 6 school employees - have been killed with guns at schools; another 201 were severely wounded; and 242 individuals were held hostage at gunpoint.
- * Shootings or hostage situations in schools have occurred in at least 35 states and the District of Columbia.
- * Males are most frequently the offenders (93%) as well as the victims (76%).
- * Schoolchildren ages 14 - 17 are most at risk of gun violence at school.
- * Gun violence in schools occurs most often in hallways (25%) and in classrooms (19%).

- * Gang or drug disputes were the leading cause of school gun violence (18%). Longstanding arguments (15%), romantic disagreements (12%), fights over material possessions (10%), and accidents (13%) are also common.
- * Handguns were the overwhelming choice of firearm (75%) for those who committed gun violence in schools.

METHOD

The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence examined gun violence in both public and private schools during the past four academic years, beginning with September 1986. The information in this report was abstracted from more than 2,500 news stories in our nation's newspapers. For purposes of this study, we examined all incidents which we were able to uncover where shootings occurred at school during school functions or where individuals held others hostage at gun point on school property during school functions. The Center examined 227 such incidents in this report. It should be noted that the accuracy and frequency of the information in this report is based solely on newspaper accounts. This method was necessary because only the state of California requires that such information be publicly disclosed.

RESULTS

During the past four school years, at least 71 people have been killed with guns at school (Table 1). At least another 201 were severely wounded. In addition, at least 242 individuals were held hostage by gun wielding assailants.

TABLE 1: Individual Deaths or Woundings

| | <u>Deaths</u> | <u>Woundings</u> | <u>Total</u> |
|------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|
| Students | 65 | 186 | 251 |
| School Employees | 6 | 15 | 21 |
| Total | 71 | 201 | 272 |

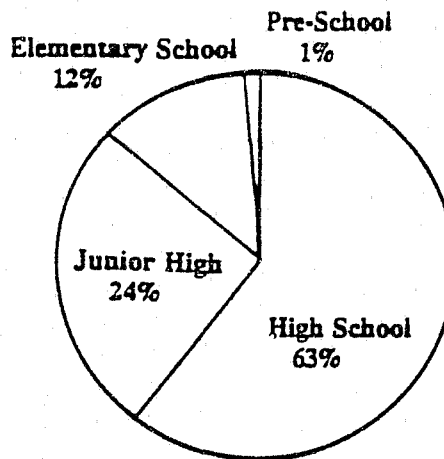
School shootings or hostage taking occurred in 35 states and the District of Columbia (Table 2). Besides the most populated states having the most incidents, there was no clear geographic pattern for gun violence in school. It seemed to strike every area of the country.

TABLE 2: Number of Incidents, Deaths, and Woundings Per States

| <u>States</u> | <u># Incidents</u> | <u>Deaths</u> | <u>Woundings</u> |
|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|------------------|
| California | 29 | 16 | 45 |
| Florida | 25 | 10 | 10 |
| New York | 23 | 3 | 21 |
| Texas | 17 | 4 | 10 |
| Georgia | 14 | 1 | 15 |
| Maryland | 10 | 1 | 9 |
| Michigan | 9 | 3 | 6 |
| Missouri | 8 | 3 | 6 |
| North Carolina | 7 | 0 | 12 |
| Illinois | 7 | 7 | 12 |
| Alabama | 5 | 1 | 4 |
| Arizona | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| Arkansas | 5 | 3 | 4 |
| New Jersey | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| Oregon | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| South Carolina | 5 | 2 | 9 |
| Tennessee | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| Connecticut | 4 | 0 | 2 |
| Louisiana | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| Pennsylvania | 4 | 0 | 3 |
| Virginia | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| Washington | 4 | 0 | 2 |
| Mississippi | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Ohio | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Dist. of Columbia | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Kentucky | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Massachusetts | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Oklahoma | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Rhode Island | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Colorado | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Indiana | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Iowa | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Minnesota | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Montana | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Nevada | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Utah | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| TOTAL | 227 | 71 | 201 |

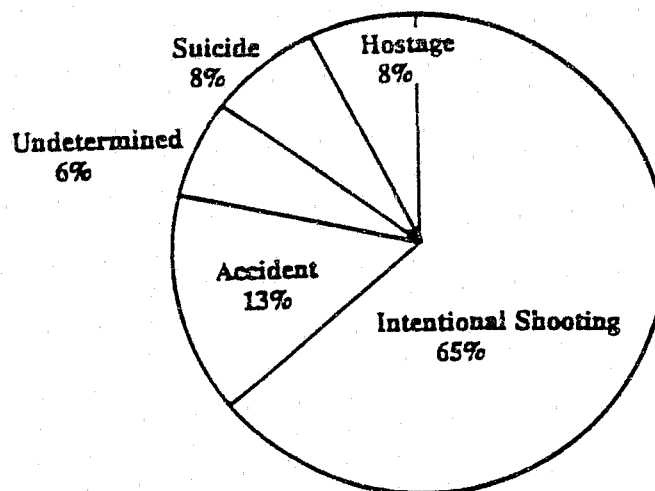
Most of these incidents took place in high schools (Table 3). Incidents were more than twice as likely to occur in high schools than any other level.

Table 3. Schools Affected by Gun Violence



Four types of gun violence was recorded in this report (intentional shootings of or at other individuals, suicide, accidental shootings, and hostage taking at gunpoint). Intentional shootings of or at other individuals were reported four times more frequently than any other type (Table 4). Accidental shootings were the second most common form.

Table 4. Types of Gun Violence



Males were far more likely to be the offenders in school shootings and hostage takings (Table 5). Males were also more likely to be the victims or targets of school shootings (Table 6). Please note that one or more persons could have been the offenders and victims of gun violence, and this is reflected in these numbers.

TABLE 5: Offenders

Males: 260 (93%)
 Females: 20 (7%)

TABLE 6: Victims or Targets

Males: 270 (76%)
 Females: 85 (24%)

Youngsters aged 14-17 were most likely to be the offenders and victims of gun violence (Table 7). When students, 12 and under, were the victims of gun violence in schools, 94 percent of the students were victimized by adults. When students, 13 and older,

were victims, 82 percent of the offenders were other students or other teenagers who came on school campuses.

TABLE 7: Age Breakdown of Offenders and Victims

| <u>Age</u> | <u>Offenders</u> | <u>Victims or Targets</u> |
|--------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Adults | 23 | 38 |
| 19 | 8 | 7 |
| 18 | 17 | 18 |
| 17 | 48 | 49 |
| 16 | 53 | 46 |
| 15 | 43 | 37 |
| 14 | 31 | 30 |
| 13 | 18 | 13 |
| 12 | 12 | 4 |
| 11 | 1 | 2 |
| 10 | 2 | 7 |
| 9 | 0 | 12 |
| 8 | 1 | 25 |
| 7 | 2 | 17 |
| 6 | 1 | 10 |
| 5 | 1 | 3 |
| Undetermined Teen | 19 | 20 |
| Undetermined Child | 0 | 17 |
| TOTAL | 280 | 355 |

There was no one major cause for gun violence in schools (Table 8). Rather, there were five causes that sparked most of the incidents -- gang-drug related activity, continuations of long-standing disagreements, playing with or cleaning guns in schools, material possessions, and romantic disagreements.

TABLE 8: Root Causes for Gun Violence in Schools

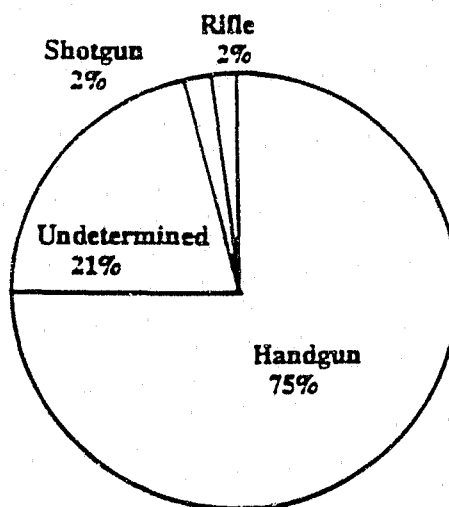
| <u>Cause</u> | <u>Incidents</u> | <u>Percentage</u> |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Drugs/Gangs | 40 | 18% |
| Long-Standing Disagreements | 35 | 15% |
| Playing with or Cleaning guns | 30 | 13% |
| Romantic Disagreements | 27 | 12% |

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| | | |
|----------------------------------|----|-----|
| Fights of Material Possessions | 22 | 10% |
| Depression | 21 | 9% |
| Vendetta Against Society | 14 | 6% |
| Racial | 12 | 5% |
| Name Calling | 10 | 4% |
| Vendetta Against School Employee | 8 | 4% |
| Undetermined | 8 | 4% |

Handguns were the weapon of choice for students and adults who committed gun-related violence in schools (Table 9).

Table 9. Weapons



Activities during the regular school day were the most common for school shootings and hostage takings (Table 10). Periods between classes were the most common times for shootings, followed by actual classroom learning situations.

TABLE 10: Activities When Gun Violence in School Occurs

| <u>Activity</u> | <u>Incidents</u> | <u>Percentage</u> |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Between Classes | 72 | 32% |
| During Class | 51 | 22% |
| After School | 36 | 16% |
| Lunchtime | 20 | 8% |
| Athletic Events | 20 | 8% |
| Transporting to and from School (buses) | 15 | 7% |
| Before Class | 11 | 5% |
| School Carnival | 1 | 1% |
| Transporting to Field Trip | 1 | 1% |

Most of the shootings and hostage taking occurred inside schools, with hallway and classroom being the most common locations (Table 11). A sizable number occurred on school grounds and areas located adjacent to school grounds.

TABLE 11: Locations of Shootings or Hostage Takings

| <u>Location</u> | <u>Incidents</u> | <u>Percentage</u> |
|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Hallways | 57 | 25% |
| Classrooms | 44 | 19% |
| School Grounds | 35 | 15% |
| Next to Schools | 20 | 9% |
| Athletic Facilities | 19 | 8% |
| School Buses | 16 | 7% |
| School Parking Lot | 11 | 5% |
| Cafeteria | 8 | 4% |
| Restroom | 5 | 2% |
| Auditorium | 1 | 1% |
| Undetermined | 11 | 5% |

PREVIOUS DATA ON GUN VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

In California, the only state that publishes annual data on gun confiscations in schools, the number of gun incidents increased 40 percent in the 1988-89 school year over the previous year. In the last four years, a 100 percent overall increase was reported, including a 50 percent rise in elementary schools and 80 percent increase in middle schools. The increase at the high school level was 142 percent.

In Florida, a 42 percent increase in gun incidents was reported during the 1987-88 school year. The rate in Florida has maintain this high level. The Chicago Public Schools reported a 50 percent rise in gun incidents in 1988. Hundreds of other school systems, from the Seattle, Washington, school district to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools in North Carolina, have reported similar trends in recent years. In Little Rock, Arkansas, three school shootings were reported in a one-month period in early 1989. The shootings were the first ever in the city's schools.

CONCLUSION

Guns and gun violence are a growing concern among educators, students and parents. While this study examined actual violence, i.e. shootings and hostage taking at gunpoint, we must also be concerned with the potential for gun violence that exists in our nation's schools.

There are many reasons why gun violence and gun confiscations are increasing in our schools. But, one simple factor leading to these incidents must not be overlooked -- the sheer availability of guns in America. For every household in the country there are two guns in the hands of private citizens. Often these guns are falling into the hands of youngsters and they are ending up in schools. A report issued by the Florida School Boards Association found that 86 percent of the weapons confiscated from students came from students' homes.

Our nation's parents, educators, lawmakers, and law enforcement officials must work together to reduce the gun violence in our schools. Students must be educated about the great danger involved in carrying guns and the real facts about gun violence. Parents must be informed about the steps they can take to reduce the potential for violence -- i.e., making sure youngsters cannot get their hands on guns in the home. And, lawmakers and law enforcement officials must work together to make sure that those who carry guns and those who commit gun violence on school property receive swift, severe punishment.

There is no place in our nation's schools for guns and gun violence. We must act now if we are going to reduce the tragic toll guns in schools are taking upon our children and our nation's future.

This report was written and supervised by Dennis Smith, the Center's director of public education. Barbara Lautman, Vanessa Scherzer, and Jacqueline Sternberg of the Center contributed.

All information in this study is based solely on the accuracy and frequency of newspaper articles from across the country.