

## The Congressional Ban on Gun Violence Research

In June of 2009, when I was the superintendent of schools in a suburban district just north of Manhattan, I was held hostage by an armed gunman who threatened to execute me. A year later in the same district, a 13-year-old drew a gun on his teachers. In both instances the district went into lockdown, and fortunately, no one was injured. These were not my only dealings with guns on a school campus. As a building principal for fifteen years, I confiscated handguns, rifles, and ammunition. I have also attended the funerals of teenagers who took their own lives with guns, including the son of an employee.

I was principal of a large middle school during Columbine—the beginning of the nation’s awakening to campus gun violence. After Sandy Hook I naively believed that this tragedy would lead to change in how the nation’s leaders—members of Congress—would respond. While advocacy groups, such as Sandy Hook Promise or Everytown, began to coalesce to understand causes and find solutions, political leaders debated the extent to which sensible laws to prevent future tragedies should be legislated. Yet, any rational decision-making was impaired by a limited body of research.

A few days after the February 2018 tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) published a statement calling for the lifting of a ban—the Dickey Amendment—that essentially prevents the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from conducting research on gun violence and warns: “None of the funds made available in this title may be used, in whole or in part, to advocate or promote gun control.”

In a March 2018 report, “Gun Policy in America,” the non-partisan Rand Corporation, also called for more research:

- To improve understanding of the real effects of gun policies, Congress should consider lifting current restrictions in appropriations legislation that limit research funding and access to data. In addition, the administration should invest in firearm research portfolios at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Institute of Justice at levels comparable to its current investment in other threats to public safety and health.

- To improve understanding of outcomes of critical concern to many in gun policy debates, the U.S. government and private research sponsors should support research examining the effects of gun laws on a wider set of outcomes, including crime, defensive gun use, hunting and sport shooting, officer-involved shootings, and the gun industry.
- To foster a more robust research program on gun policy, Congress should consider eliminating the restrictions it has imposed on the use of gun trace data for research purposes.
- Researchers, reviewers, academics, and science reporters should expect new analyses of the effects of gun policies to improve on earlier studies by persuasively addressing the methodological limitations of earlier studies, including problems with statistical power, model overfitting, covariate selection, and poorly calibrated standard errors, among others.

There are some in Congress who, indeed, want more information. Following the school shooting in Florida, House Speaker Paul Ryan said, “This is not the time to jump to some conclusions not knowing the full facts.” We agree. We need facts and lots of them. Those facts come from research.

One of AERA’s stated missions is to gather or support research that addresses school safety issues. The *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice* has similar goals. The Journal not only seeks to provide quality research to our superintendent-practitioners, but the Editorial Board has a responsibility to ensure publication of quality research that will help school leaders make informed decisions about school safety.

The events in Parkland, Florida, unfolded on the eve of AASA’s annual conference in Nashville. In his response to the event, Executive Director, Dan Domenech, presented a set of facts and a recollection of a previous statement: “According to the Washington Post we are averaging one school shooting per week this year. Since 2000, there have been 130 shootings resulting in 250 student and teacher deaths. Subsequent to the Sandy Hook shooting, the AASA Governing Board in July 2013 adopted a position paper on School Safety that says: *If we hope to prevent future tragedies at schools, we must comprehensively address both school safety and gun safety. Increased mental health services, community supports for youth, and new attitudes about violence in our entertainment must all be part of this approach. We must be willing to spend the time and resources necessary to make sustainable changes.*

It is our ethical responsibility as superintendents and scholar-practitioners to advocate for members of Congress to not only repeal the Dickey amendment but go beyond it by providing the funding of research and research-supported measures to maximize school safety.

Ken Mitchell, Editor  
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## References

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