

Policy 360 – Episode 645 – Why Arming Teachers Won't Work – Transcript

KB: Hello and welcome to Policy 360, I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

"The tragic Parkland, Florida shooting on February 14th is yet another dreadful reminder that schools are no sanctuary against mass violence." This is the opening line from an Op-Ed written by my next guest, Philip J. Cook. Phil is a professor at Sanford and is one of the country's preeminent researchers on gun violence in America.

Welcome to Policy 360. Would you mind reading the rest of the first paragraph from your Op-Ed?

PC: Americans are surely united in wanting reforms that could prevent these rampages and make their schools safer. Some reforms look promising and are worth discussing, but the reform that is getting the most attention in this bizarre era the we live in -- arming teachers with hand guns -- would likely make things worse.

KB: Let's talk about that proposition. Why would arming teachers make things worse?

PC: So, I think the first thing to say about that, which I think needs to be said very carefully, because I certainly would not want to minimize the problem of mass shootings in schools, but the thing I want to say is that they are rare events. And, if you think about just the sheer numbers that are involved, that there are 130,000 schools -- high, middle, grade schools -- in this country and approximately one shooting a month, that ends up being a 1 in 100,000 proposition. And in that sense, thank goodness, these shootings are rare events. And that becomes relevant in talking about policy. We have to scale the size of the problem before we can talk realistically about how to respond to it.

My concern is that the response that is getting the most attention, which would be, say, put school teachers in the position of being armed guards for the school, and possibly would add a dozen new guns in every new school in the country would add a new risk, and we need to think about how that risk compares to the risk of mass shootings. So, that's the kind of comparison that I did as a thought experiment in this Op-Ed.

KB: So, just talking about the numbers now, you said 130,000 schools, and if there were 10 guns introduced into each school on average (who knows what that number would be), but let's just say it's 10, that's an enormous number of new guns that are just entering the system all of a sudden.

PC: Yes, if we now decide that we are going to now put a million new guns into the schools, even if the misuse of any one of those guns is also a fairly rare event, you multiply that

small probability by a million and you have a sure thing. And I think that actually you see that already with school resource officers or others have discharged guns or where there has been an accidental discharge by a gun that's dropped in school. Occasionally a takeaway situation by a student in the school. My daughter is actually a school teacher here locally and school teachers have enough trouble keeping track of their cell phones, let alone a gun, and she like most teachers is very worried that her colleagues would be packing heat and all the things that might happen as a result of that.

KB: Talk through that a little bit more, what do you see as the risks of teachers being armed in schools in a systematic way?

PC: So I think that the first thing is that when you have a loaded gun there is a chance the gun will discharge accidentally, it will be mishandled, or there might be a takeaway situation where a student figures out how to get a gun from a teacher. So we have those scenarios, again not common, not the kind of thing that's going to happen every day but if we have a million plus additional guns in the schools it is going to happen very often. And that's certainly one thing I worry about.

A second is that teachers are human, they're in very stressful positions often, that they're being challenged by their teachers, especially at the middle and high school level, they're asked to break up fights, generally manage contentious situations. If they're carrying a gun, there might be a natural inclination to turn to the gun to solve those kinds of problems or managing unruly students. And so, to some extent, the problem might become intentional use by teachers who are at wit's end and are currently finding other ways to deal with a situation that does not result in loss of life.

The other issue that occurs to me, which is worth worrying about, is the mindset that goes with carrying a gun in very many cases. And we know that, from the ethnographic work that is done, talking to people who carry guns with them while they go out in public, what they're thinking about, how the gun influences their outlook, and I think in many cases what they say is that they find themselves being vigilant, scanning the horizon for threats, rehearsing scenarios in their mind about how they would handle different kinds of violent situations, and the focus then turns from the normal way of existing in a public situation to very much about the gun and how they might end up using it. I think that's not the mindset that we want from our elementary school teachers or high school teachers. That kind of vigilance and focus is going to get in the way inevitably to the nurturing and supportive role that is the responsibility of the teacher.

KB: So the argument is that arming the teachers might be a deterrent, so that people wouldn't come into schools with guns to kill people, or that armed teachers might be able to stop some action once it began. How do you weigh that against the kinds of risks you are talking about?

PC: So, I think that's possible, if there were a number of additional guns in every school that we would eventually see over the decade cases where a teacher was able to deploy a gun and stop an active shooter. I think that more likely, is, that the gun would prove futile and the shooter would come in with an assault weapon, an AR-15 or something, and would have no trouble dealing with the challenge posed by a more or less untrained teacher with a hand gun. So, even in the case, where the shooter invaded a school, the possibility that an armed teacher would make a difference is far from 100%.

KB: Are there recommendations that have come out of previous school shootings that you think it would be wise to implement?

PC: You know, given that this is a rare event, I think that we need to find solutions that are tailored to the actual scale that we are looking at. One set of lessons that we have were prepared by the secret service in a study that they did on the school shootings that occurred during the 1990s. The school shootings that culminated with Columbine. And one thing that the secret service found was that in most of those case, the overwhelming majority of those cases, the shooter had tipped his hand, that he had told his classmates what he intended to do, and therefore there were other students in the school that knew what was going to happen or had a pretty good idea, the problem was that they were not going to the teacher or the principal, they were keeping it to themselves so that the information could not be used to interrupt this plan. We've seen the same thing in some of the recent accounts of school shootings, that it has not been prepared in secret, that in fact it's almost supposed to be, in the eyes of the shooter, a public event, and that kind of information, if it can be identified and passed on to the right authorities, has the promise to give a fairly precise response to the actual threats. And that seems like a fairly high priority.

I think it's also true that the authorities need to have the tools that they need to interrupt the process. One of those tools requires legislation in most states, including in North Carolina, and that is the ability that if you identify someone who is planning an attack, to be able to take their guns away from them. So that there needs to be an emergency response through a court order under those circumstances.

KB: So, Phil, after the Parkland, Florida shooting, a level of national reaction on the part of other students has really been unprecedented, with marches either having occurred or being planned, students mobilizing politically to have a voice around these issues. Do you see this as a profound change in the way that the country is responding?

PC: It always pays to be cynical when it comes to the possibility of progress, especially with Congress, because there have been so many other vivid events that have come to nothing, especially at the federal level. But perhaps this is a different time thanks to the student leadership and their ability to call on the conscious of the adults and say, "we are the

potential victims here, and you adults are the ones in charge, but you need to protect us," and I think that message is very fresh in an area that often becomes stale, where the same people repeat the same things along the way. And I'm not willing to be 100% pessimistic this time around. But I think there is a chance that it will have influence with some state legislatures, that it will influence the elections in November, and that eventually it might even make a difference with Congress.

KB: Do you see the reaction of the Florida legislature after the shooting as a positive move?

PC: It is. I think that Florida has by and large been very pro-gun in its legislature over the years, and led the way on issuing concealed carry permits to a very large percentage of the Florida public, led the way on the stand your ground law that basically de-regulated homicide under many circumstances. So this was by no means a foregone conclusion that there could be moderate restrictions placed on the distribution on guns and the possession of guns. With that example, I'd say we have some reason for some optimism going forward.

KB: Well if you take that, coupled with some of the corporate actions that have been taken in regard to the NRA, do you see the influence changing of that organization or the gun lobby in general?

PC: I think the power of the gun lobby is based partly on their ability to mobilize some part of their membership politically, and partly on the fact that they have tens of millions of dollars to spend on political races. But, I think the greater power that they have comes from the myth that they are, at least in many jurisdictions, unbeatable. That anybody that opposes them is going to lose if they run for office. And so, that is something that we are going to have to wait and see, and the November elections will be a case in point. I think it's never been entirely accurate that they've been unbeatable or that the candidates endorsed by the NRA have been automatic winners, that's not been true. But, I think that that's the source of power, this myth that they are so powerful, is something that is being challenged right now and ultimately might deflate their actual power.

KB: Thank you so much for joining us today. And, you know sadly these issues are incredibly timely, and it seems to be that way going on and on and on. So, we appreciate your fine scholarly work on this and the strong voice you have for reason and for evidence-based policy. So thank you again for coming today.

PC: My pleasure, thank you.