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# Illicit juvenile weapon possession: The role of serious sanctioning in future behavior

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### ABSTRACT

Although existing literature has well-examined basic weapon carrying trends for juveniles, little is known about weapon carriers' differential experiences with serious sanctions including suspension, expulsion, or juvenile adjudication. It is unknown what types of weapon carriers are more likely to be subject to these sanctions or the effect of these sanctions on future behavior. The present study addresses these gaps in the literature using data obtained from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. Results indicate that seriously sanctioned weapon carriers are associated with a delinquent and risky lifestyle while other weapon carriers largely avoid these problem behaviors. Both groups, however, bring weapons to school equally often. Findings indicate that weapon carriers with gang membership are less likely to carry weapons to school or work in adulthood or own a handgun in adulthood if they avoid serious sanctioning. Policy implications of these findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

On October 24th, 2014, Jaylen Fryberg, a 15-year-old high school freshman, shot five other students at Marysville Pilchuck High School in Marysville, Washington, before fatally shooting himself (Johnson, 2014). Though this shooting did not receive the same degree of media attention as those at Sandy Hook Elementary, Virginia Tech, Columbine High School, and several notable others, it raised many of the same questions. Where did the student get the gun? Why did he bring it to school? What motivated his violence? Although it often takes events like these to bring concerns with juveniles, weapons, and violence to the forefront, the reality is that weapons make their way into schools and classrooms every day.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2014), more than 5% of respondents to the 2013 High School Youth

Risk Behavior Survey reported carrying a gun, knife, or club to school in the past 30 days (Centers for Disease Control, 2014). The U.S. is not alone. In a study of adolescents in 35 countries, between 10% and 22% of males and between 2% and 5% of females reported carrying a weapon in the past 30 days (Pickett et al., 2005). Though these percentages, at least in the U.S., have declined substantially since the early 1990's, repeated incidents of mass violence have continued to illustrate the potential for juvenile weapon possession, particularly of firearms, to result in violence. Violence, itself, also contributes to weapon carrying by youth. Past research has found gang membership, drug use, delinquency, and victimization all to be significant predictors of adolescent weapon carrying (Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, & Howard, 2000; Stickley et al., 2015).

Given high levels of public concern with gun violence in the 1990's, most states and schools developed specific policies, largely based on the principles of deterrence theory, barring juveniles from carrying firearms on school property and elsewhere. Federal legislation including the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and 2002 as well as the Gun-Free

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School Zones Act of 1990 made Federal funding contingent on zero tolerance firearms policies in school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). However, these laws were specific to firearms. Less is known about other weapons that juveniles may carry to school. Also, juvenile weapon carrying may go undetected unless the weapons are used in a reported threat or act of violence. Little is known about how differential involvement with school discipline or the juvenile justice system among juvenile weapon carriers might affect future delinquent behavior.

To address this gap in the literature, the present paper has two aims. First, this study will identify how juvenile weapon carriers subject to serious school discipline (suspension and expulsion) or juvenile justice system involvement differ from other students who report carrying a weapon to school. This paper examines sanctioning irrespective of whether the sanctioning was for a weapons offense or for some other behavior. Second, the present paper explores the role of school discipline and juvenile justice system involvement in the future behavior of youth who carry weapons to school. Namely, this paper examines whether youth who report suspension, expulsion, or juvenile justice system involvement are more likely to desist from further weapon-related violations and behaviors than other juveniles who carry weapons to school. These forms of sanctioning are considered because they are the most serious available, and also because they are the sanctions most typically applied for weapons violations.

## 2. Juvenile weapon carrying

Past research has identified some of the key demographic, social, and behavioral characteristics of juveniles who carry weapons. As with many other forms of delinquent behavior, males are more likely to carry weapons than females (Centers for Disease Control, 2014; Hemenway, Prothrow-Stith, Bergstein, Ander, & Kennedy, 1996; Lizotte et al., 2000). However, there is some variation in type of weapon preferred. Males, in research by Pickett et al. (2005) tended to carry proactive weapons (like guns and clubs), while females tended to carry more reactive or protective weapons (like pepper spray). The authors attributed these differences to cross-national variation in the acceptability of certain weapon types, attitudes toward violence, and weapon accessibility (Pickett et al., 2005).

Other predictors include delinquent behavior and gang membership. Lizotte et al. (2000), using the Rochester Youth Development Survey, examined illegal gun carrying among young urban males. For respondents in early adolescence, gang membership was strongly predictive of gun carrying (Lizotte et al., 2000). For older adolescents, heavy drug use and involvement in the drug trade were significant predictors of gun carrying (Lizotte et al., 2000). In a study of Czech, Russian, and U.S. adolescents, substance use was associated with male weapon carrying at school in all three countries (Stickley et al., 2015). In Europe, membership in a deviant peer group (i.e. gang) was associated with a variety of delinquent behaviors, including weapon carrying, in a study by Gatti, Haymoz, and Schadee (2011). In a sample of African American adolescents ages 13–19, Lane, Cunningham, and Ellen (2004) found that a history of delin-

quency was positively associated with future intentions to carry a knife among both males and females, while it was not associated with fear of victimization.

Lizotte et al. (2000) explained the connection between gangs and gun carrying as a desire for protection from dangerous situations. Illegal drug trade and rival gangs present the potential for violence; gang members may not feel protected by more traditional forces of social control, like police, and use guns as a form of social control instead (Lizotte et al., 2000). In past studies with U.S. adolescents, personal protection was the primary reason adolescents expressed for owning or carrying firearms (May, 1999; Sheley & Wright, 1993). Likewise, Saukkonen et al. (2015) found that higher levels of perceived security and safety in a sample of Finnish adolescents were associated with reduced gun carrying, though were not associated with other forms of weapon carrying.

It is important to note that not all juveniles who carry weapons are involved in gangs or illegal activity. Lizotte, Tesoriero, Thornberry, & Krohn (1994) identified two categories of adolescent gun owners: protection gun owners and sport gun owners. Sport gun owners carried guns less frequently and had only a slight increase in delinquent activity compared to adolescents without guns (Lizotte et al., 1994). Victimization experiences are also associated with weapon carrying. In a study of Czech, Russian, and U.S. adolescents, Stickley et al. (2015) found that violent behavior, as either offender or victim, was linked to school weapon carrying across the three populations. Webster, Gainer, and Champion (1993) found that knowing many victims of violence was associated with both knife carrying and gun carrying in the U.S., while serious delinquency was only associated with gun carrying. Dijkstra, Gest, Lindenberg, Veenstra, and Cillessen (2012) also found that peer-reported victimization increased the likelihood of weapon carrying. Unfortunately, the extant literature does not take into account differential involvement with school discipline or the juvenile justice system among juvenile weapon carriers.

## 3. Detecting juvenile weapon carrying

One reason juvenile gun carriers may find themselves subject to juvenile justice or school-based sanctioning is detection of their weapon carrying behavior. Schools employ a variety of security methods that might detect weapon carrying by students. During the 2011–2012 school year, 7.9% of high schools reported the use of random metal detector sweeps of students; 4.6% of high schools used metal detectors routinely for all students on a daily basis (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, Morgan, & Snyder, 2014). Approximately 26% of high schools performed random searches for contraband (Robers et al., 2014). Most high schools reported the use of security cameras (81.2%) and daily police or security presence (57.6%) (Robers et al., 2014). Roughly 9% of high schools banned book bags or required them to be clear, addressing one avenue by which weapons might be concealed (Robers et al., 2014).

In spite of these practices, unless a weapon is displayed, used, or someone makes a report, weapon carrying by juveniles can go undetected. Even if a student is disciplined

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