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Arm the educators… but not without conditions: a qualitative assessment of law enforcement officers' support for armed teacher policies

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of high-profile mass shootings in schools, policymakers have explored options designed to mitigate harms to students, faculty, staff, and visitors during similar tragedies. Among the most controversial measures introduced has been armed teacher policies, which currently are authorized in some form in more than half of U.S. states despite no evidence about their effectiveness in such situations. Public support for arming teachers is divided, though the perceptions of law enforcement, who would be tasked with responding to the shooting and could potentially encounter armed teachers, has been largely overlooked. This study helps to address this gap through a qualitative evaluation of feedback provided by officers as part of a broader survey. Ten subthemes were identified in the responses and were grouped into three broader categories: the value of armed teachers, training (both broadly and related to specific requirements), and other considerations. Broader implications for policymakers stemming from these perceptions also are explored.

Mass public shootings, both within and outside of schools, continue to be a cause for concern among policymakers and the public alike (African American Research Collaborative, 2022; Sanchez & Bennett, 2023). Although these events are statistically rare in the context of the national crime picture (Schildkraut, 2021), their increases in both frequency and lethality continue to generate calls for policies and practices designed to prevent these tragedies from occurring or, if they do, minimizing their impact. This need to 'do something' has been further amplified by recent high-profile mass shootings in schools, including at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL (2018) and Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX (2022), despite that these types of events are the rarest form of gun violence that occurs at educational institutions (see, e.g., Freilich et al., 2022, who find that most shootings at schools occur outside of the school building, during non-school hours, are perpetrated by non-students, and may be motivated by non-school issues [e.g., gang violence]). Even still, schools continue to be among the safest places for children (Fox & Friedel, 2018). The national discourse following these tragedies has been filled with proposed solutions, from target hardening options (e.g., bulletproof glass, metal detectors, entry control access) to emergency preparedness practices like lockdown or active shooter drills (see, generally, Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019). Among the most controversial measures to be proposed are policies authorizing the arming of teachers and staff at schools.

South Dakota became the first state to authorize educators to be armed on school grounds (Eligon, 2013), passing the law in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in

Newtown, CT the year prior. This policy, however, did not gain traction for another five years when, following the Parkland shooting, President Donald Trump spoke at length about his support for similar policies during a meeting with survivors and victims' families (Taylor, 2018). He also publicly supported a position statement from the National Rifle Association that promoted armed teachers as an effective defense strategy against school shooters (American Bar Association, 2019). Within weeks, Florida governor Rick Scott signed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (Fla, 2018) into law, which included the establishment of the Coach Aaron Feis Guardian Program. This program, named for one of the staff members killed in the shooting, authorized school personnel to carry firearms on their respective campus after completing certain conditions, including 144 hours of training and extensive psychological and drug screenings (Florida Department of Education, 2020). Although federal law has designated, with few exceptions, that schools are 'gun free zones' (see 18 U.S.C. § 922(q)(2)(B)), 28 states (Giffords Law Center, n.d.) and more than 500 school districts (Owen, 2019) currently allow staff to be armed in some manner. Notably, in absence of federal guidance on this issue, the requirements for educators to be armed, including the number of training hours, vary by state and even the school districts themselves (Erwin, 2019; Richmond, 2019).

Despite assertions that armed teachers could deter potential school shooters (Campbell, 2016; DeMitchell, 2014; DeMitchell & Rath, 2019; Lott, 2019; Wallace, 2019) or end an attack more quickly (Anklam et al., 2015), no empirical evidence exists to support such claims (American Bar Association, 2019; Minshew, 2018; Rajan & Branas, 2018). Between 2000 and 2022, for example, no active shooter situation in a school was stopped by an armed civilian (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). Additionally, concerns exist that the presence of armed teachers could result in increased casualties during school shootings, both as it relates to these individuals being mistaken as the perpetrators by responding police officers (Buerger & Buerger, 2010; DeMitchell & Rath, 2019; National Association of School Resource Officers, 2018) or for others, including law enforcement, being caught in the crossfire (DeMitchell & Rath, 2019; National Association of School Resource Officers, 2018; Weatherby, 2015). Further, research has found that police officers hit their intended targets between 18% and 54% of the time they fire their weapons in both real-world shootings (Gillespie, 2013; Lombardo, 2016; Morrison, 2006; Richards et al., 2016; Rostker et al., 2008; White, 2006) and active shooter simulations (Hansen, 2018). With teachers and school staff receiving less extensive training than police, coupled with the potential for certain skills (e.g., mindfulness, combat breathing) not being taught, it is likely that these individuals would have even lower hit rates (Downey, 2018; Hansen, 2018; Weatherby, 2015). Moreover, potential exists for armed teachers to compromise the day-to-day physical security of schools if firearms fall into the wrong hands (Drake & Yurvati, 2018; Drane, 2020; Weiler & Armenta, 2014), are accidentally discharged (Hansen, 2018; Weatherby, 2015), or lead to increases in targeted violence (Frederick, 1999).

A growing body of research has considered public support for armed teacher policies, finding that opinions across different segments of the populace remain sharply divided (Baranauskas, 2021; Bonn, 2019; Horowitz, 2018; Jonson et al., 2021; Mancini et al., 2020; Montanaro, 2018; Newport, 2018; Rasmussen Reports, 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who are most likely to be impacted by an armed teacher policy – students (Brenan, 2018; Sides, 2018; Walker, 2018), teachers (Brenan, 2018; Husser et al., 2018; Plus, 2018; Walker, 2018; Willner, 2019), and administrators (Chrusciel et al., 2015; Weiler & Armenta, 2014; Weiler et al., 2018) – also are the most likely to oppose it. These groups instead have indicated that an armed teacher policy would make schools less safe (Sides, 2018; Walker, 2018), it would not be effective at limiting casualties should a shooting occur (Brenan, 2018), and that only school resource officers (SROs) should be permitted to carry firearms (Chrusciel et al., 2015; Weiler & Armenta, 2014).

Importantly, there is an additional group for which armed teacher policies could have considerable implications – law enforcement officers (LEOs). These individuals typically serve as the first responders in incidents of school violence like an active shooter event and could be in high-stress

situations where they would have to engage with armed teachers; therefore, they are in a unique position to offer perspective about the benefits and consequences of these policies. Research, however, has largely overlooked LEOs' perspectives on armed teachers, with just three studies to date exploring this line of inquiry. Chrusciel et al. (2015) found that police executives, while nearly unanimously supporting the employment of SROs in schools, strongly opposed policies that would allow teachers to be armed. Conversely, Schildkraut and Martaindale (2022) found that the LEOs in their study overwhelmingly supported arming teachers, but those officers in supervisory positions or who were SROs and therefore may have more contact with such individuals were significantly less likely to endorse such a policy. Training was a primary concern of respondents, with LEOs who believed that teachers lacked the necessary skills to respond to an active shooter event also being less likely to support arming them Schildkraut and Martaindale (2022). Martaindale and Schildkraut (2022) further identified specific areas of training that LEOs believed were necessary for teachers who wished to be armed: the impacts of stress on decision-making, safe handling and storage of firearms, scenario-based training, and effective communication with police during an event.

Although these studies provide important insights about whether LEOs support armed teacher policies, additional inquiry is needed. The present study seeks to build upon this existing scholarship using a qualitative lens to delve deeper into LEOs' perspectives on armed teacher policies. Such qualitative inquiry is useful when little is known about a particular phenomenon – in this case, armed teacher policies – and to both triangulate (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and provide context to survey findings. From a practical perspective, local law enforcement agencies in some states may be responsible for launching or overseeing such programs, including establishing qualification criteria, providing training and certification, and maintaining records for individuals who qualify to carry their firearms. Additionally, as noted, these officers also may encounter armed teachers in the course of their daily professional responsibilities, both during and outside of a crisis. As such, better understanding the factors that underlie LEOs' support or opposition for arming educators can have important implications for such policies moving forward.

Method

The present study is part of a larger project seeking to better understand the perspectives of LEOs about armed teacher policies (see Martaindale & Schildkraut, 2022; Schildkraut & Martaindale, 2022). Once IRB approval was received,[1] a random sample of approximately 3,900 LEOs from across the United States, drawn from a list of previous trainees, was provided by a national law enforcement training center. Initial emails were sent to these potential participants inviting them to complete a web-based survey in Qualtrics, with two follow-up reminders sent approximately 10 and 20 days later. The survey remained open for one month and surveys were collected from 405 LEOs. This represents a response rate of just over 10%, which is in line with other web-based surveys of law enforcement officers drawn from more than one agency (see Nix et al., 2019).

Within the survey, respondents were asked to rate their agreement about their general perceptions of armed teacher policies (e.g., "Armed teachers are an effective strategy to defend schools against active shooters or other threats.") and requirements if educators were to be armed (e.g., "Teachers who wish to be armed at school should be required to carry liability insurance."). They also were asked to rate their agreement to common arguments for (e.g., "Having armed teachers in schools will aid police in response to active shooters.") and against (e.g., "Teachers do not generally have the necessary training to respond to an active shooter.") armed teacher policies. Additional close-ended questions asked respondents about the recommended minimum number of training hours, frequency of recertification, types of firearms and ammunition to be permitted for use, and prioritization of training topics; demographic information also was collected. At the end of the survey, an open-ended question was included where respondents could expand on their rationale for why they did or did not support an armed teacher policy. Specifically, respondents were presented with the following prompt: "Lastly, do you have any additional thoughts to share about

armed teachers in schools? (Example: Why do you think it's a good or bad idea, have ideas related to training needs, or anything else you would like to add?)"

A total of 188 officers provided answers to the open-ended question and are the focus of the present study. Responses varied in length, from just three words ("Every second counts") to a high of 376 words. The mean number of words per response was 60 and the median number was 50. Further, 17.6% of open-ended responses received were fewer than 20 words (i.e., fewer than two sentences), whereas 15.4% were 100 words or more.

The demographic breakdown of the full sample, as well as the officers who responded to the open-ended question, is presented in Table 1. As illustrated, the distribution of the qualitative sample's characteristics is largely consistent with those of the full sample of survey takers. In both samples, the majority of participants identified as male and White, with both demographic groups slightly overrepresented in comparison to LEOs nationwide (88% male and 73% White; see Hyland & Davis, 2019). The mean age of respondents in the present study's sample was 44.1 years of age, and roughly half served in a supervisory position at the time the survey was taken. Approximately 81% of respondents worked in local law enforcement offices, which is on par with officers nationwide (80%, see Hyland & Davis, 2019); the remainder were employed with state or federal agencies, and there was wide variability in the sizes of the departments represented. Responses were received from officers within 38 different states, representing all four of the U.S. Census's defined geographic regions, and just over one-third served urban populations.

Data analysis

Both authors conducted an initial readthrough of the LEOs' responses to the open-ended question. This was followed by a second review where memos and notes were made regarding recurrent themes in the responses. The authors then met to discuss the themes and subsequently developed the project codebook (see Appendix A). A random sample of 20% of the LEOs' responses was drawn and each author coded them independently across the respective themes. The unit of analysis was the response, which was coded for the presence or absence of

Table 1. Sample descriptive Statistics.

	Full Sample		Qualitative Only Sample	
	Mean (SD)	n (%)	Mean (SD)	n (%)
Age	42.88 (9.9)	365	44.1 (9.7)	187
Male		336 (92.1)		175 (93.1)
White		296 (81.5)		149 (79.3)
Current Supervisor		201 (55.5)		102 (54.6)
Job Duty				
Patrol		171 (47.2)		67 (35.6)
SRO		32 (8.8)		18 (9.6)
Other		159 (43.9)		102 (54.3)
Department Size				
<10		22 (6.4)		12 (6.4)
10–49		96 (27.8)		44 (23.4)
50–99		50 (14.5)		30 (16.0)
100–249		58 (16.8)		35 (18.6)
250–749		57 (16.5)		28 (14.9)
750+		62 (18.0)		34 (18.1)
Geographic Region				
Northeast		71 (19.9)		32 (17.0)
South		187 (59.5)		101 (53.7)
Midwest		53 (14.9)		27 (14.4)
West		45 (12.6)		28 (14.9)
Urban		129 (35.6)		70 (37.2)

Note. For the variables Job Duty, Department Size, and Geographic Region, percentages may not total to 100.0% due to rounding error or missing data.

Table 2. Frequency of responses coded for each theme.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Value of Armed Teachers		
Valuable	91	48.4
Not Valuable	45	23.9
Training		
General Reference	106	56.4
Specific Requirements	47	25.0
Skills Taught	25	13.3
Other Considerations		
Policy Requirements	64	34.0
Communication with LEOs	51	27.1
Safe Storage/Handling	27	14.4
Capabilities	26	13.8
Prior Experience	6	3.2

Note. Percentages relative to the total number of respondents ($n = 188$).

the theme. Once both authors completed their coding, intercoder reliability was computed to determine their level of agreement. Across the full sample of responses, there was 95% coding agreement across all themes, which exceeds the minimum recommended threshold (see, generally, Miles & Huberman, 1994). Despite the low level of intercoder disagreement, the authors still met and reviewed the discrepancies in their coding. Minor modifications were made in the codebook to add clarification on the themes before the full sample was divided, with each author coding half of the responses (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Once all coding was completed, the two sets of responses were merged to conduct the final analyses. Of the 188 responses received, 5.9% ($n = 11$) had no subthemes coded as being present. For those that were coded, the number of subthemes present per response ranged from one to eight, with a mean of 2.8 codes and a median of three codes.

Results

The analytic process, including the initial readthroughs of the LEOs' responses, revealed three main themes. Within these broader categories, 10 subthemes were identified. The first broader category, *value of armed teachers*, encompasses responses highlighting ways in which the presence of such individuals could benefit or harm the educational environment both during and beyond an active shooter event. The second group, *training*, includes both general references as well as those related to specific requirements and skills that should be taught. The final category encompasses *other considerations*, such as safe storage and handling, policy requirements, communications with LEOs, and capabilities and prior experience of the perspective firearm carrier. The list of themes with their respective frequencies is presented in Table 2.

Value of armed teachers

In line with our previous quantitative findings (Martaindale & Schildkraut, 2022; Schildkraut & Martaindale, 2022), nearly twice as many LEOs referenced armed teachers as being a valuable resource rather than being harmful in their comments. In fact, nearly half of the LEOs who offered any comments referenced the benefits of having armed teachers and staff in schools. When examining specific underlying explanations for this support, the primary reason provided was response time – more than one-third (35.2%) of the LEOs offered this as a justification. Specifically, as one patrol officer for a state law enforcement agency in Virginia commented,

> Police response to an active shooter takes precious time that the victims may not have. Arming responsible teachers who are appropriately trained and willing to go through the required safety precautions could greatly assist law enforcement in neutralizing the threat earlier, which could effectively save lives.

Data from the FBI shows that most active shooter situations are over in five minutes or less (Blair & Schweit, 2014), and law enforcement may just be arriving on scene as the event is reaching its conclusion. For rural communities, response times may be delayed even further in larger geographical jurisdictions that also have fewer resources at their disposal (Buerger & Buerger, 2010). As another officer, who works as a patrol officer for a police department in Massachusetts, noted, "Nothing is faster than already being there." Thus, having armed teachers and staff could lead to a more instantaneous response, such that the threat is neutralized more quickly and lives can be saved (Campbell, 2016; DeMitchell & Rath, 2019; Drake & Yurvati, 2018; Wallace, 2019).

A secondary justification for the value of armed teachers and staff in schools is that they would serve as a deterrent for would-be shooters. Of those LEOs who expressed seeing value in armed teacher policies, just over 12% referenced a possible deterrent effect. As suggested by one respondent, a Washington sheriff's office captain, "If I am an evil doer and I don't know which teacher may be armed, I must assume all are. This makes the target much harder for a [prospective] shooter or terrorist." As noted, schools have been designated by the federal government as 'gun free zones' with rare exception, such as for law enforcement working in their official capacity or when on private property that is not directly part of school grounds (18 U.S.C. § 922(q)(2)(B)). This gives the perception that schools are "soft targets" while also being "civilian-centric" (Hesterman, 2015, p. 1), meaning that there are large numbers of potential victims who congregate in a single location that typically is not fortified. Thus, allowing teachers and staff to be armed is seen as a way to protect the building and reduce the vulnerability of the individuals within it.

For those LEOs who expressed belief that armed teachers and staff would not be a valuable resource for schools, the most common reason was the potential for accidental casualties. Specifically, more than one out of every five respondents (21.3%) who expressed concern about the harmful effects of such a policy also highlighted the potential for additional casualties, either from law enforcement accidentally shooting the armed individual, them being shot by the perpetrator, or from armed individuals shooting each other. One concern raised by a respondent, a sergeant from a Georgia university police department, is that

> [M]any teachers lack the training to respond to extremely high-stress situations (i.e., life or death) and the inattentional blindness (i.e., tunnel vision) during high-stress/shooting incidents may result in the teacher's inability to comply with law enforcement commands to disarm/drop their weapon when confronted, which could end negatively for both the teacher and responding law enforcement officers.

Similarly, a corporal with a Delaware state law enforcement agency pointed out that "[t]he average teacher with no prior law enforcement or military background is not familiar with or how to react during stressful situations, which could potentially make the situation worse, leading to additional casualties," while a sheriff's office sergeant from Florida highlighted "the risk of crossfire between teachers trying to stop a threat." Concern over collateral casualties, however, was not solely limited to those that occur during an active shooter event. Nearly 11% of respondents also highlighted the potential for further harm to be caused by students overpowering the armed teachers and staff to take the firearms or them gaining control of weapons that are left accessible (see also Drane, 2020). Additionally, approximately 13% of LEOs raised concerns over how the presence of armed teachers and staff would make their responses more difficult: "Armed teachers would cause police to hesitate when we identify a weapon, potentially causing an increase loss of life" (from a police captain in a rural Oklahoma community).

Interestingly, while many of the LEOs provided comments referencing either the positive or negative values of arming teachers, 21 respondents (17.9%) provided remarks that reflected both aspects. One SRO serving a rural community in Georgia, for example, noted that

> There are too many variables to easily say yes or no. Some teachers have the correct mindset to be armed, many do not. My school has around 1400 students and close to 80 teachers. I can only think of 5 or 6 that could safely be armed. Many teachers do not want to be armed. Some have a hard enough time teaching, much less defending students. . . . I am not against it. I just have too many questions.

Despite that some of these LEOs supported the overall idea of arming teachers, they also recognized the potential pitfalls and liabilities of doing so. These respondents typically highlighted the need for proper vetting of individuals who would be carrying in the schools (rather than any teacher or staff member being permitted to do so), thorough training to ensure firearm proficiency, and clear guidelines that establish what the role of the armed individual is (e.g., seeking out the perpetrator versus holding position in the classroom and providing protection to the students). As summarized by a corporal at a university police department in Tennessee, "while I believe arming teachers is a good thing to deter active shooter events, more thought, training, and guidelines will need to go into that idea to make it safe and effective." Thus, for some LEOs, the decision about arming teachers and staff is not necessarily clear-cut, highlighting the need for policymakers and other stakeholders to consider all aspects of the program and carefully weigh the benefits and costs before deciding whether to implement.

Training

As reported in Table 2, a majority (56.4%) of the LEOs who provided comments highlighted the importance of training in their remarks. Of these respondents, nearly 53% offered general statements about training but did not provide further details about what such instruction might entail. For instance, a captain working in a suburban police department in Maryland noted that "[a]rming teachers creates a multitude of issues and would require a great amount of training to be implemented safely." Conversely, a patrol officer in an urban police department in Pennsylvania commented that "[w]ith the proper training and implementation of armed teachers in schools, we could see active shooter incidents greatly diminish or, at the very least, see the carnage from these incidents greatly reduced." These disparate remarks illustrate how LEOs who either saw value in arming teachers and staff or who believed such practices to be harmful used training as a justification for their respective positions.

Specific requirements

One out of every four LEOs, however, provided more insight about specific requirements that should be included within any training associated with armed teacher programs. The most common training need highlighted by the LEOs was scenario-based training, which was referenced by nearly 49% of respondents discussing specific requirements. This type of training can be used as a form stress inoculation, such that individuals can be exposed to physical or mental pressures in a controlled environment and learn to counteract their effects to improve proficiency in response (see, generally, McAllister et al., 2022). For armed teachers and staff, scenario-based training could be used to not only acclimate them to responding within their building's specific conditions but also to work through shoot/don't shoot situations, avoiding collateral casualties, and, as noted by one SRO in an urban Arizona sheriff's office, "safe use of force in active shooter and non-active shooter scenarios."

In addition to scenario-based training, nearly one-quarter of LEOs highlighted the importance of armed teachers and staff receiving instruction alongside police. An SRO in Mississippi, who also serves as the assistant chief for the police department, indicated that "I would feel more comfortable with teachers carrying if they trained with their SRO. By seeing them train, we can determine if we think they are capable of carrying." Additionally, as noted by one patrol officer with an Indiana state law enforcement agency, "[e]stablishing continuity with the training between law enforcement and civilians is vital in mitigating the loss of life." Several LEOs also commented that by having teachers and staff train alongside them, it would increase familiarity with who might be armed during the response, which may help to reduce delays and accidental casualties from mistaken identity (e.g., thinking the armed teacher or staff is the perpetrator).

A third area of consideration relative to specific training requirements was how much training time should be required and how frequently it should be carried out. Interestingly, despite seven

LEOs referencing a specific number of hours of training that teachers and staff wishing to be armed should undergo, there was disagreement with how much time should be required. At the low end, one officer indicated that training should last one to two days (8–16 hours); conversely, another LEO recommended an upper limit of at least 120 hours (three weeks based on 40 hours per week). In addition to training time, six officers also recommended additional time on the range to improve armed teachers' proficiency with their respective weapons. Similar variability also was identified relative to how frequently retraining and recertification should be conducted, with LEOs recommending either quarterly, biannually, or annually. It is possible that the differences among officers' perceptions of how much time should be invested into preparing teachers and staff to be armed on campus may be reflective of the variability in the training requirements across states (see Erwin, 2019). Still, the fact that these respondents highlighted a need for requirements about the number of training hours and frequency of requalification speaks to, as highlighted by one patrol sergeant from an urban Louisiana police department, their recognition of the perishability of shooting skills and the need to ensure they are maintained over time.

Skills taught

Within their remarks, a portion of the LEOs (13.3%) provided recommendations on the content or skills that should be taught within the training. These could be broadly grouped into three overarching categories: (1) firearms-related, (2) procedural, and (3) practical skills. Related to the firearms, LEOs referenced the necessity of training related to concealment, safe storage, handling (including deploying the weapon from concealment), and accuracy of shooting, particularly as it related to stress. Within the procedural category, officers referenced the need for armed teachers and staff to receive instruction on what to do when law enforcement arrived on scene, including how to communicate, as well as the potential legal considerations that stemmed from them being armed and using their weapons during an emergency. Further, the officers also recommended training on practical skills, including crisis intervention and de-escalation, target discrimination (e.g., identifying the actual threat from others who are present at the scene), defensive tactics, and tactical emergency casualty care to rapidly treat individuals who may be injured. Importantly, each of these different skills was referenced by the LEOs with similar frequency and often in combination with other competencies, highlighting the need for a comprehensive training program to be developed and delivered covering all relevant aspects of being armed for the purpose of responding during a school shooting or similar event.

Other considerations

While training was the greatest focus of the LEOs who offered comments, they also raised additional considerations relative to armed teacher policies. In first considering potential policy requirements, regardless of whether selections are made through a voluntary process or selectively authorized, LEOs highlighted the need for a comprehensive vetting process for teachers and staff who will be armed. This included, but was not limited to, the individuals passing background checks and psychological evaluations, their level of physical fitness, consideration of prior experience (e.g., former law enforcement, military), and demonstrated proficiency with firearms. As summarized by one patrol officer from a suburban Washington police department,

> I believe the selection of volunteers is critical to the success of this kind of thing, just like the selection of police officers is. Not everyone wants to do the job; not everyone that wants to do the job wants to do it for the right reasons; not everyone that wants to do the job is capable of doing the job.

Further, nearly 13% of the LEOs who discussed policy requirements referenced the need for the individuals to be re-evaluated and recertified on a regular basis. This underscores the belief not only that firearm skills are perishable but also that while someone may be qualified to be armed at one point in time, they may not still be at another. Notably, just one LEO expressed a need for the armed

teacher to have a concealed carry permit as part of the authorization process and three indicated that the armed personnel should be required to maintain liability insurance.

The second main area of policy consideration related to identification of the armed teacher or staff. In fact, more than one out of every four LEOs discussing program requirements indicated that there needed to be a clear ID policy in place. This included mention of different types of ID, from vests and sashes to uniforms and ID cards. More than 11% of the LEOs also highlighted the need for police to know, preferably in advance (whether through general notification, by the individual being sworn in by police, or as an inclusion in the standard operating procedure to be shared with the department), who in the building would be armed when they arrived on scene. This stems from an additional consideration that served as a prevalent theme in the responses – communication, which was referenced by more than 27% of the LEOs. The two main concerns highlighted were the challenges for police in differentiating the assailant and armed teacher, which would slow down their response time, and the potential for friendly fire. As noted by a patrol sergeant in an urban Maryland sheriff's office, "Blue on blue shootings happen on occasion. And that is with all the training, communications, and identification that is available to us. How will we train, communicate, or identify teachers under the extreme stress of an active shooter?" Interestingly, however, while the LEOs consistently agreed that they would need to know who was armed, there was variability in perceptions of who in the building needed to be made aware, though this consideration was only raised by three respondents. One LEO indicated that students should not know which teachers and staff members are armed; for staff, one respondent said staff should be advised while another said that there be no disclosure of who is armed.

Two additional considerations were raised by the LEOs with nearly equal frequency. The first of these was the capabilities of the armed teachers. As summarized by one police lieutenant in South Carolina, "Arming all teachers is not feasible or practical." Some LEOs did acknowledge that there would be teachers and staff who potentially could meet the challenges of an armed response to an active shooter situation, highlighting weapons proficiency as an underlying rationale. Still, others noted the lack of practicality for such a policy, indicating that teachers lack the training to achieve proficiency in shooting and target selection in real-world situations. Further, as one police captain in a rural Oklahoma community pointed out, "many of them [the teachers] think of students as their children. Many of the teachers would either be unwilling to shoot or run an increased risk of mental trauma after the event." The second consideration raised by the LEOs was safe storage and handling. In this vein, one patrol officer from an urban Ohio police department commented that, "I spent 18 years as an SRO; a lot of teachers have a hard enough time keeping track of phones and flash drives let alone a firearm." Comments in this theme referenced not only needing to securely store the weapon while it was on school grounds, whether it was in a safe or concealed on their person, but also for the firearm to be safely retained by the carrier so that it does not fall into the hands of a student (see also Drane, 2020). Collectively, the perceptions offered by the LEOs, both positive and negative, highlight important considerations for armed teacher policies moving forward.

Discussion

Although events like Parkland and Uvalde are among the rarest forms of gun violence both in and out of schools (Freilich et al., 2022), they nevertheless drive the conversations for policymakers, district and school administrators, and the public alike about how best to keep students and staff safe. Among the many potential solutions designed to deter potential school shooters or minimize their impact if the attacks come to fruition is arming teachers and staff. Despite an absence of empirical evidence about the effectiveness of armed teacher policies, due in part to the low base rate of school-based mass shootings (see, generally, Rocque, 2012), they still are authorized in more than half of the states across the nation (RAND Corporation, 2020). Public support for arming teachers and staff, while divided, may

have facilitated the implementation of these policies, but the perceptions of law enforcement in this conversation have been critically overlooked. To fill this gap, we analyzed open-ended responses elicited from LEOs as part of a larger survey designed to understand their perceptions, both positive and negative, related to armed teacher policies. From our findings, four key takeaways are warranted.

First, despite a majority of the LEOs supporting the general idea of arming teachers (Martaindale & Schildkraut, 2022; Schildkraut & Martaindale, 2022, present study), it is not unilaterally endorsed nor done so without conditions. As one lieutenant from a Florida state law enforcement agency summarized relative to his support, "The RIGHT teacher absolutely should be armed. The WRONG teacher absolutely should not be armed," and other LEOs shared similar sentiments. With concerns noted about the mindset needed to respond to an active shooter, the 'right' teacher identified by the LEOs was someone with previous law enforcement or military experience who would have likely already received training to be prepared for such an incident already. Although skills like firearm accuracy in stressful situations, target discrimination, and communicating with police could potentially be taught in training, the LEOs did not seem to believe that all teachers and staff would be suited for instruction. Accordingly, both with and in the absence of previous experience, many respondents highlighted the need for proper vetting of any would-be participant in the program, including comprehensive background checks, psychological screenings, and assessments of physical fitness. Annual re-evaluations of their background (including mental fitness) and firearms proficiency, at a minimum, were perceived as necessary requirements for any teachers and staff participating in such a program to ensure that only those who were deemed capable were permitted to be armed. Further, clear guidelines are needed about the role of the armed teacher in an active shooter situation (e.g., whether they should act defensively protecting students in the classroom or leave to attempt to neutralize the shooter), how they will be identified (e.g., vest, ID card), and where their weapons should be kept (e.g., on their person, in a safe) on a day-to-day basis. In addition to these standards being included in the school's standard operating procedures or crisis plans, they also should be shared with local law enforcement agencies, particularly if police are not part of the establishment of the program or associated training.

Second, in addition to the LEOs overwhelmingly highlighting the importance of training for any teachers and staff who would be armed, there also were different aspects of potential instruction that were highlighted as necessary. Specifically, there was considerable support for scenario-based training, which not only can improve firearms handling and shooting accuracy but do so in stressful situations and in conditions most likely to be faced by the armed teacher (see also McAllister et al., 2022). Recent research has found that, for civilians, varying scenarios can lead to different outcomes for simulated active shooter situations, particularly in settings that may be unfamiliar (see, for example, Zhu et al., 2022). Scenario-based training also can improve perceptions of preparedness (Janairo et al., 2021), as the armed teachers and staff would be able to work through different challenges they may face in a controlled environment and then practice their responses during training exercises and may be used to develop new or enhance existing skills related to target discrimination or defensive tactics.

In addition to scenario-based training, respondents also pointed to the importance of armed teachers and staff training alongside or under the guidance of law enforcement. Doing so provides multiple benefits, including the LEOs being able to assess the skill level of the armed teacher and becoming familiar with them for easier identification when on scene of an emergency. A final point consistently raised by the LEOs relative to training was for the need for it to be ongoing. As summarized by one patrol officer from a rural Massachusetts police department, "firearms is a perishable skill; one cannot just take a training once a year and expect to be able to maintain a minimum level of proficiency at a high stress moment." While the officers could not pinpoint an agreed-upon optimal number of hours or frequency of retraining, similar to the variable requirements across the different states with such a policy in place (see Erwin, 2019), their emphasis on

consistency and regularity in training frequency to prevent skill degradation must be factored into any armed teacher policy.

Third, aside from public and police perceptions of arming teachers, there is a clear need for policymakers and administrators to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of such policies before deciding whether to implement them. A number of LEOs, for example, pointed to the need to have SROs in schools ahead of armed teachers. To employ just one SRO in each of the nation's 99,271 public K-12 schools, however, would cost between $7.5 billion and $9.6 billion annually (Hill, 2013),[2] and some schools may need more than one SRO based on their size. Schools also may not have the financial means to employ SROs, which has led some proponents to point out that it would be less expensive to arm teachers (Nedzel, 2014). Estimates indicate that providing just initial training and a standard firearm (e.g., a Glock G17 pistol) to one teacher per public school in the U.S. during the 2021–22 academic year would cost districts and taxpayers between $34.6 million and $148.9 million (Bump, 2018).[3] There are, however, other costs that also must be factored in, including background checks, mental health screenings, licensing, training, storage, and the weapons themselves if being provided by the school (United Educators, 2020). A more comprehensive estimate accounting for one-time (i.e., policy establishment, screening, signage, and purchase of a weapon, holster, and gun safe) and ongoing (i.e., training, district liability insurance, psychological testing, ammunition) costs of arming teachers yields estimates of $774 million to $967.6 million to establish the program and an additional $505.4 million to $775.1 million to maintain it annually for the same 99,271 educators (see Weiler et al., 2018).[4]

Still, there are other factors that must be considered related to the cost of arming teachers, which may be more difficult to quantify. Experts have contended that the potential liabilities stemming from arming teachers create exposure for schools and districts (Weatherby, 2015). These entities typically would be shielded from any legal liabilities stemming from third parties; allowing armed teachers and staff in the buildings, however, could amount to a government-created risk that would negate such protections (DeMitchell & Rath, 2019; Rogers et al., 2018; Weatherby, 2015). In the same vein, the increased opportunity for such liabilities has led insurance companies to increase premiums for schools (McCausland, 2018), if they even issue the policy in the first place (Rostron, 2014). It likely would be too costly for each armed teacher to maintain an individual liability policy, which may limit the number of people who could be considered for the program in the first place, coupled with them not being willing to assume the risk of collateral damages without the same qualified immunity protections afforded to law enforcement. Moreover, policymakers and administrators must weigh the statistical rarity of school shootings against other relevant practical concerns (e.g., the more likely accidental discharges or injuries, misplaced firearms in the school building, increases in targeted violence; see Drane, 2020; Frederick, 1999; Weatherby, 2015) as well as the impacts that the increased presence of firearms could have on the learning environment (Ciamacca, 2018; Husser et al., 2018; Marchbanks et al., 2018; Minshew, 2018).

Finally, no study is without its limitations, and we must acknowledge a few here. Although the original sample drawn for the survey from the law enforcement training center was random in nature, the sample of responses to the open-ended question was largely one of convenience based on those LEOs who chose to take the time to provide additional thoughts. As such, the perspectives gleaned from these remarks may not be reflective of the views of law enforcement as a whole or even those officers who completed the survey. Moreover, this training center primarily focuses on response to active shooter events, which can include those that occur at schools. Future research also should seek the perspectives of law enforcement who have not yet participated in this training to determine whether they differ and in what ways they do from the officers who shared their insights in the present study. Further, the open-ended question was unstructured in nature, simply asking the LEOs to provide any additional thoughts they were interested in sharing. Had more structured questions been asked, it is likely that we would have received more in-depth responses about specific policy considerations. Future research may wish to elicit such responses either by

using more structured open-ended questions within a survey instrument or by conducting interviews or focus groups with the LEOs.

Whether to arm teachers and staff remains a complex question with no easy answer. As policymakers and administrators continue to weigh this policy alongside a myriad of other potential prevention and response solutions, it is critical to consider the perceptions of those, like law enforcement, who have a nuanced perspective of armed teachers and staff, their benefits, and their drawbacks. The law enforcement perspective of armed teacher policies, if incorporated, will enhance policies to help protect teachers, students, staff, and visitors at schools across the nation. While research, including the present study, has provided important insights into who could potentially be armed and under what conditions, the need for corresponding evaluations of the effectiveness of existing policies is even more imperative. Future research must evaluate current policies to better understand their real-world impact and apply empirical backing to current and future armed teacher policies.

Notes

1. This project was approved by the Texas State University IRB under proposal # 7382.
2. Hill's (2013) estimates for the 2009–10 school year were based on 132,183 schools (both public and private) with estimates for salary and benefits at $75,000 to $97,000 annually. We recalculated his figures for the 2021–22 school year, when there were 99,271 public schools in operation in the U.S (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).
3. Based on Bump's (2018) estimates based on arming one-fifth of teachers, or 718,000 individuals, it would cost between $348.58 and $1,500 per armed teacher. This does not assume any ongoing training costs.
4. For comparison, the statistics related to more comprehensive costs were computed by taking Weiler et al. (2018) calculations, based on one armed educator per school across 12 schools in a district, determining the cost per educator rather than district. This translates to $7,797.08 to $9,746.67 per individual for the initial costs and $5,091.25 to $7,807.50 per person each year thereafter.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Codebook

Theme	Description
Capabilities	Respondent describes capabilities of armed teachers, including accuracy of shooting, proficiency with weapon, perishability of skills. May be general or specific, positive or negative.
Communication	Respondent references communication between armed teacher and law enforcement, either generally or specifically and either positive or negative. May include general references to police identification of armed teachers.
Prior Experience	Respondent describes need for prior experience to serve in an armed teacher capacity, including prior experience with military and/or law enforcement.
Requirements	Respondents describes general or specific requirements related to establishing guidelines for armed teacher policies, procedures for vetting participants, identification of armed teachers (e.g., vests, badges, or other markers), and other similar concerns.
Resource – Not Valuable	Respondent identifies way in which the presence of armed teachers can be harmful/bad, including accidental discharges, friendly fire concerns, and other potential liabilities (e.g., student vulnerability, being armed is not the teacher's role).
Resource – Valuable	Respondent identifies ways in which the presence of armed teachers can be valuable/helpful/good, including acting as a deterrent, harm mitigation/saving lives, or faster response times.
Safe Storage and Handling	Respondent describes necessity or requirements for safe storage and handling (including retention) of firearms on school grounds either generally or in specific detail.
Training – General	Respondent references anything, either positive or negative, related to training that is not captured in any of the other training-related themes.
Training – Requirements	Respondent references specific requirements for training, including number of hours for program and/or on range, scenario-based training.
Training – Skills Taught	Respondent specifically refers to the skills being taught during training, including combat breathing, target discrimination, defensive tactics, legal concerns, and the like.