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Possession, Transportation, and Use of Firearms by Older Youth in 4-H Shooting Sports Programs

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Abstract

Thirty years ago we would think nothing of driving to school with a jackknife in our pocket or rifle in the gun rack. Since then, the practices of possessing, transporting, and using firearms have been limited by laws, rules, and public perception. Despite restrictions on youth, the Youth Handgun Safety Act does afford 4-H shooting sports members certain rights. This Tools of the Trade highlights the relevant laws and explains the strategy used in Oregon 4-H to help its youth responsibly possess, transport, and use firearms for legitimate purposes.

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Introduction

Thirty years ago most of us would think nothing of driving to school with a jackknife in our pocket or a rifle in the gun rack. It was a convenience afforded most rural American youth that allowed us quicker egress from a long day of learning to the outdoor recreation we enjoyed.

Today the practices of possessing, transporting, and using firearms as tools of work, education, recreation, and competition have been limited by federal and state laws, school administrative rules, and public perceptions. Failure to follow the rules, even when only through human error, is met with severe, zero-tolerance consequences in the forms of arrests, fines, suspensions, and expulsions.

It is therefore critical that any youth shooting sports program properly educate and equip its members to safely and responsibly possess, transport, and use firearms. This Tools of the Trade highlights relevant laws affecting youth enrolled in shooting sports programs and the strategy used by the a 4-H program to aid its members.

Situation

Nationally, there are approximately 6,211,000 youth in grades 4 through 12 participating in the 4-H program, according to 2012 data (P. Craven, personal communication, November 6, 2013).

Approximately 454,000 are in the 10th through 12th grades (Craven). Nationally, the 4-H shooting sports program addresses the development needs of approximately 320,400 youth in grades 4 through 12 via club-based programs, special interest activities, camps, and fairs (D. White, personal communication, November 6, 2013). Of this number, nearly 196,500 participate in club-based programs and fairs (White). If the percentage of older youth involved in club and fair shooting sports opportunities mirrors the national overall program, then an estimated 14,350 youth are expected to be in 10th through 12th grades. Given that age range, some 4-H shooting sports members likely provide their own transportation to and from 4-H shooting sports events, making it critical for programs to have a strategy for helping them abide by the law.

Literature Review

Studies have considered the 4-H shooting sports program's impact on youth-at-risk (Sabo & Hamilton, 1997); its influence on youth development, family, and resiliency (Hauer & Carlson, 1999); and its effects on life skills development, parent financial commitment, and state economy (Jenke, 2003). White and Smith (in press) have addressed the acquisition, custody, and storage of firearms used in a state's 4-H shooting sports program. However, literature specific to strategies designed to help 4-H educators with the mechanics of running 4-H shooting sports programs is lacking.

Federal Law

The Youth Handgun Safety Act Notice of 1998 (2002) is advisory information related to the Youth Handgun Safety Act of 1994 (2012). The notice is posted and printed information provided to purchasers of firearms from Federal Firearms Licensees. It warns the purchaser of the following:

(1) The misuse of handguns is a leading contributor to juvenile violence and fatalities. (2) Safely storing and securing firearms away from children will help prevent the unlawful possession of handguns by juveniles, stop accidents, and save lives. (3) Federal law prohibits, except in certain limited circumstances, anyone under 18 years of age from knowingly possessing a handgun, or any person from selling, delivering, or otherwise transferring a handgun to a person under 18. (4) A knowing violation of the prohibition against selling, delivering, or otherwise transferring a gun to a person under the age of 18 is, under certain circumstances, punishable by up to 10 years in prison. (Page 1168)

The Youth Handgun Safety Act of 1994 (2012) indicates that it is unlawful for a juvenile to knowingly possess a handgun or the ammunition that is suitable for use only in a handgun. Does this mean older 4-H shooting sports members are in danger of breaking the law? Not necessarily. The Act does indicate certain circumstances are afforded exceptions to the federal law. It allows youth to possess, transport, and use a handgun for target practice, hunting, or a course of instruction in its safe and lawful use with the prior written consent of the juvenile's parent or guardian.

Strategy for Safe and Responsible Possession, Transportation, and Use of Firearms in 4-H

Oregon 4-H master shooting sports volunteers become qualified to lead club-based programs through mandatory training provided by the nationally trained Oregon 4-H state shooting sports training team. These leaders now adhere to a practice employed by the Montana State University 4-H Western Heritage Project (Kesner, 2012), which helps mitigate potential problems with youth possessing, transporting, and using firearms. Leaders provide business-sized cards to enrolled 4-H shooting sports members that contain important information.

On the front, the card reads "I am an enrolled member in the Oregon 4-H Shooting Sports Program. I participate in a 4-H course of instruction in the safe and lawful use of firearms." On the back, it reads "In accordance with the Youth Handgun Safety Act, I grant permission for my child to transport, handle, and discharge firearms in an Oregon 4-H Shooting Sports Program course of instruction in the safe and lawful use of firearms" (see Appendix).

The card is intended to help a law enforcement officer who has contact with a 4-H shooting sports member understand the reason the youth is in possession of and transporting any firearm. The card is not a permit to have a firearm for any other purpose not provided for in the law. Nor does it allow for the concealment of certain firearms on one's person or in one's possession.

Conclusion

The Oregon 4-H shooting sports program is committed to the safe and responsible possession, transportation, and use of firearms used by all of its 4-H members. As the 4-H shooting sports program continues to evolve, new developments and new implementation strategies will focus on protective factors to minimize risks that threaten safety, increase personal responsibility, and address concerns of 4-H stakeholders.

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- Youth Handgun Safety Act of 1994, 18 U.S.C. §992(x) (2012).
- Youth Handgun Safety Act Notice of 1998, 27 C.F.R. §178.103 (2002).

Appendix



**I am an enrolled member in the
Oregon 4-H Shooting Sports Program.
I participate in a 4-H course of instruction in the
safe and lawful use of firearms.**

**In accordance with the Youth Handgun Safety
Act, I grant permission for my child to transport,
handle, and discharge firearms in an Oregon 4-H
Shooting Sports Program course of instruction in
the safe and lawful use of firearms.**

Parent/Guardian Signature

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