



Gun Restrictions and School Shootings

Rachel Weinberg

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States leads the world when it comes to mass shootings. Many of these shootings take place in schools, ranging from elementary to graduate schools. This brief will cover how the strictness of gun laws and restrictions correlate with school shootings. The brief will also talk about mass school shootings in general and how these can be combated with policy implementations.

II. OVERVIEW

Gun violence is a large and persistent problem in the United States. The US leads the world in mass and school shootings, and the comparison is not even close. Despite progress in gun restrictions and laws, school shootings remain a prevalent problem, affecting not just teachers and students, but entire communities. This is partially due to the illegal acquisition of guns, however relaxed gun laws near schools play a role in school shootings across the US. The state of gun laws near different types of schools may play a role in this. This brief will particularly investigate policy that can reduce school shooting rates and new policy to even further that reduction. Also, this paper investigates the phenomena of relaxed gun laws in order to understand how school shootings have persisted in the United States.

Relevance

School shootings in the United States are a major problem. Rates have been growing at an alarming rate since 1997. Gun violence, especially mass school shootings, are extremely common in US society today. According to Everytown Research, in 2025 alone there have already been 44 incidents of gunfire on school grounds, resulting in 12 deaths and 36 injuries nationally. The US ranks number one in the world when it comes to violence on school grounds (elementary level to university). Even though multiple states have made the move for stricter gun laws, especially near schools, the rate of school shootings continues to go up. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that from 1997 to 2022, there were 1453 school shootings. The most recent 5 years substantially higher number of school shootings than the prior 20 years. This shows the need for stricter gun laws near schools, and the investigation into whether those laws really do make a difference.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Mass school shootings have been a long standing issue in the United States. Because of the culture around gun ownership, propagated by the 2nd Amendment, owning a gun is very common, and it has been this way for a long time. Rates of gun ownership have been high even since the 70s. Also, ownership grew in part due to the ruling in *McDonald v Chicago*. This case ruled that the

Second Amendment applied to the states. This meant states and municipalities could no longer restrict gun ownership as freely as they had before.

School shootings have become increasingly prevalent in US society today, but they have always been a tragic part of our history. Early shootings, such as the Enoch Brown School Massacre in 1764, were isolated, but shooting began to grow in number as the United States entered the 20th century. A shift occurred after the 1966 University of Texas Tower shooting, where then after, school shootings began to grow greatly in number. According to a study at UNLV, there have been at least 2,260 K-12 school shooting incidents since 1966, and that number continues to grow every week. The 1989 Cleveland Elementary School shooting further ingrained the issue of school shootings into the public eye, and people began to push for change. The first push at laws aimed to reduce school shootings by setting up laws around school zones was in 1990. The Gun-Free School Zones Act prohibited unauthorized firearm possession within 1,000 feet of any K-12 school. Even since this act, shootings have gone up. In the late 90s, there was Columbine and then Sandy Hook in 2012. More strict laws have been enforced, like prohibiting the known possession or carrying of any gun on any community college, college, or university. Laws like that have been enforced in states like Illinois and New York. However, even with similar and even more local legislation, school shootings continue to rise. Past tragedies highlight the need for stricter gun laws near schools to prioritize the wellbeing and safety of students and faculty.

POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

It is given that the stakeholders in this policy problem are the students themselves, as well as the families, faculty, and communities that are affected by these tragedies. School shootings and the lack of laws regulating them allow for these shootings to grow in frequency, affecting communities all over the US. Students and families are affected by the losses of their peers. Enrollment in schools also drops as a result of these shootings, and the use of antidepressants is increased in those who have experienced a shooting.

School districts and local governments are stakeholders as they stand to benefit from stricter laws that reduce shootings, leading to safer communities and higher government support. However, passing gun laws is difficult due to the partisan nature of the issue. Therefore, it is needed to push the idea that gun restrictions will not limit gun rights and ownership. Laws need to be put in place to ensure the safety of students when attending schools.

B. Risks of Indifference

Risks of indifference to school shootings lies in the party polarization on the issue. Passing gun laws through state legislatures is extremely hard, even when there is a Democratic supermajority. During my research, I talked to Representative Hirschauer (D) of the Illinois State House who explained that even with a majority, due to push back from Republicans, gun restrictions can take years to pass. With that, if stakeholders continue to neglect the problem at hand, it is a given that the rate of school shootings will continue to

increase. It should be said bluntly, that without action people will die. Schools and communities will grow more dangerous due to inaction. This is not to mention that inaction will negatively affect local governments, and overtime, a lack of inaction could damage public opinion on those governments.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because school shootings don't only affect individuals, but rather societies and communities themselves, it is imperative that nonpartisan intervention takes place. The benefits of interventions include but are not limited to:

- 1) **Reduced gun violence:** Gun safety policies save lives. In states where elected officials have taken action to pass gun safety laws, fewer people die by gun violence. States that push for safer and stronger gun laws are less likely to be affected by school shootings. States like California, Massachusetts, and Connecticut have significantly lower shooting rates compared to states like Idaho, Mississippi, and Arkansas, which have very relaxed gun laws. According to Everytown Research, if states with relaxed restrictions worked to tighten their laws, we could save 299,000 lives in the next decade.
- 2) **Reduced access to firearms:** Stricter laws, such as background checks and waiting periods, can prevent individuals with a history of violence or mental health issues from obtaining guns. This makes sure that the people that are obtaining guns in the United States are able to care for and use their weapons in a productive manner. It is the responsibility of governments to make

sure that guns end up in the right hands.

- 3) **Safer Communities:** Students should feel safe when attending school. A 3rd grader should not have to worry about being shot when learning multiplication. Students that have experienced one shooting should not have to experience another.

Communities should not have to be ravaged by the devastating losses of students and faculty. Reduced school shootings lead to increased student mental and physical well-being, improved educational outcomes, enhanced learning environments, and increased public trust.

IV. TRIED POLICY

To begin with, a quite recent policy was implemented in the United States and was aimed at reducing gun violence and school shootings: the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (SB2938). This was a bill that passed through Congress and became law on 06/25/2022. This is a federal law aimed at reducing gun violence and improving safety in schools and communities. It strengthens existing gun laws, provides funding for mental health and violence intervention programs, and encourages states to implement crisis intervention programs like "red flag laws". These "red flag laws" allow temporary removal of firearms from individuals deemed a danger to themselves or others. The BSCA has been one of the most successful gun laws implemented by Congress in recent years, as the Biden Administration has used BSCA to invest more resources in school safety and take significant steps to reduce school shootings and mass shootings. However, even though the BSCA has seen success, its effects are still being debated. While it has demonstrated

some positive impacts, the long term effects are still unknown.

Extreme Risk laws or “red flag laws” have had a strong impact on reducing school shootings. ERPOs are not criminal laws, but rather civil actions to protect public safety. These laws allow family members and police to petition a civil court for an order, the ERPO, to temporarily remove guns from dangerous situations. This allows for dangerous situations to be de-escalated before they reach dangerous levels and lead to school shootings. It is no surprise that Connecticut and New York, the states with the largest amounts of ERPO petitions, have some of the lowest levels of school shootings in the US.

Lastly, most school codes have protections from assault weapons in place. According to the Illinois General Assembly, the Illinois School Code requires school staff to immediately report any firearm spotted on school grounds to the principal, unless doing so would risk student safety. The principal must then alert law enforcement and notify parents if a student is involved. The law protects those who report in good faith from legal consequences and ensures confidentiality. This statute is a key part of Illinois’ efforts to prevent school shootings by ensuring quick, coordinated responses to threats. Laws such as these are a step in the right direction for preventing school shootings, but they are not enough.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

Background checks and access to guns: States need to work to implement policy to combat school shootings. Many states in the US do not currently work to implement policy to combat gun violence, even when their state is a leader in

school shooting numbers. To combat this, it is needed for all states to work towards implementing background checks and/or permits to purchase handguns. Requiring background checks before a gun purchase ensures that the buyer is not legally prohibited from having guns due to criminal history or mental health disability. Laws like these slow firearm homicides and in turn reduce school shootings.

Increased uses of ERPOs: As stated before, preventing school shootings before they occur is important. If states work to increase the awareness around these petitions, then family and community members will know what to do when someone who is struggling has a gun. States should make sure that someone with a history of violence of mental health struggles does not even have access to a gun.

Offices of Gun Violence Intervention: The federal office of GVP was the driving force to introduce the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. Offices like these allow state governments to have a department that specifically focuses on preventing gun violence. However, only 13 states have established these offices. With continued implementation, states could focus on reducing school shootings and creating safer communities.

Holding gun manufacturers accountable: During my time with Students Demand Action, I was introduced to a bill that could have tremendous impacts on school shootings. Even though most people believe that most school shootings are committed with AKs, this is false. Many school shootings are committed with handguns, around 85% from 1990 to 2016 as reported by Heilio News. These handguns can easily be converted to an automatic rifle capable of firing 1,200 rounds per minute with a simple

switch. These switches are cheap and easy to acquire. Most states have not outlawed switches and gun manufacturers, especially Glock, manufacture their guns in such a way that these switches can be easily attached. It is imperative that states push to outlaw these switches as well as make the push to hold gun manufacturers accountable. If we reduce the harm that simple handguns can cause, we can reduce death rates in school shootings.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have explored the devastating effects of school shootings on their communities as well as providing solutions in the form of restrictions for states to implement. It is imperative that states push to implement the policies listed above and work to reduce the chances that these tragedies will occur.

With that said, implementing these policies is not easy. Pushback is frequent and intense because of the constitutionality of gun laws. Many originalists do not think restrictions like the ones listed above should be implemented because they conflict with the right to bear arms in the 2nd Amendment. Gridlock is frequent when it comes to gun laws and many never make it out of either house in federal and state government. Also, even though states like California and Illinois have pushed to reduce school shootings through ERPO laws and offices dedicated to gun violence, most states lack those same advancements. However, I believe that if we work to stress the devastating impact of school shootings on students and families alike, then we can begin to implement policy to combat them.

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