

Guns and School Safety: What is the Best Way Forward?

On February 14, 2018, a shooter went to his former high school in Parkland, Florida, and shot and killed 17 people. The community was **traumatized**. Within days, student-survivors of the shooting helped organize a rally. Speeches by students went viral. Student actions gave the national debate on gun safety a lot of attention. The shooting and survivors' responses also sparked debates about what schools should do to keep campuses safe.

News outlets described the Parkland shooting as the 18th school shooting of 2018, less than two months into the year. Not all school shootings are mass public shootings (or "**mass shootings**"). Certainly, all shootings are concerning for Americans. Between 2006 and 2013, two out of seven mass shootings at schools involved more than 10 deaths. Over the years, lawmakers have responded to these traumatic events, and the public has experienced disagreement about what should be done.

SUMMARIZE: In 1-2 sentences, note the main idea of these paragraphs.

What is the Current Law?

There are federal laws about gun safety at schools, and there are state laws. The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that an individual has the right to own firearms, but the Supreme Court has said the government *can* impose reasonable regulations on gun ownership.

Federal Law (Laws that apply to all people living in the U.S.)

Given the individual right to own guns, what has Congress done over the years about school safety? In 1990, Congress passed the Gun Free School Zones Act (GFSZA). This law prohibits any person from knowingly possessing a firearm in a place that person knows, or reasonably should know, is a "school zone." A school zone includes the grounds of public and private schools, as well as public property within 1,000 feet from the grounds of those schools.

The GFSZA's prohibition has exceptions. For example, police officers are allowed to possess firearms, as are local residents on private property. In 1994, Congress passed a law specifically about students and guns called the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA). This law requires any school receiving federal funds (public schools) to expel students for at least one year if they possess a gun at school. After the Sandy Hook shooting, President Barack Obama issued executive orders to improve training for law enforcement and school officials on "active shooter" situations. The Department of Justice also gave grants to school districts to hire more school resource officers (SROs).

Glossary

active shooter: a person who is actively trying to shoot other people, usually in a confined and populated area.

concealed: kept secret; hidden.

lobbying: seek to influence (a politician or public official) on an issue.

lockdown: a situation in which a school's doors and gates are locked, and students and staff stay away from windows and wait for law enforcement.

manufacturers: a person or company that makes goods for sale.

mass shooting: an incident involving multiple victims of firearms-related violence.

prohibit: forbid something by law, rule, or other authority.

traumatized: subject to lasting shock as a result of an emotionally disturbing experience of physical injury.

unconstitutional: not in agreements with a political law for the U.S.

State Law (Laws that apply to people in each state)

State laws vary from state to state. Almost all states, however, **prohibit** guns in K-12 schools. Many states do allow people to get licenses to carry a **concealed** weapon. In general, “plain-clothes police” can get these permits, and in some states, so can people who show “good cause” (e.g., documented threats from another). Eight states either allow concealed firearms at K-12 schools or just do not have a law to prohibit them.

SHOW WHAT YOU KNOW: Give an example of a Federal law and a California law.

Proposed Policies

<p><i>Increasing the Use of School Resource Officers (SROs)</i></p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A survey showed that 90% of resource officers stop between 1-25 violent acts in schools each year. • Violence has gone down nationwide at schools since the mid-1990s when more SROs were put in schools. • SROs often work as informal counselors at their schools. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some argue that school officers treat misbehaving juveniles harshly. • Many disciplinary problems handled by SROs would be better handled by the principal’s office. • SROs are not effective; they were present at the Parkland shooting and at Columbine High School (where 13 people were killed). 	<p><i>Active Shooter Drills</i></p> <p>Many school districts practice for an active shooter to prepare students for this situation.</p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports the use of traditional lockdowns as part of any active shooter drill. • Active shooter drills are like fire drills. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some parents oppose active shooter drills because they can leave some children traumatized. • NASP warns that an active shooter drill is only as good as the training of school staff beforehand.
<p><i>Gun Control</i></p> <p>Gun control means a law or laws that restrict either the type of guns that can be sold; the ability of certain people to buy or own guns; or both.</p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiting periods after gun sales would delay a person’s ability to have a gun immediately. • Background checks would restrict people with violent criminal records from owning guns. • Minimum age to buy a handgun should be raised to 21. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Rifle Association (NRA), a lobbying organization for gun owners and manufacturers, argues that gun control laws are unconstitutional. • NRA argues that improving mental health treatment will stop people from illegally using guns. • NRA supports increased punishments for illegal gun use. 	<p><i>Arming Teachers and School Staff</i></p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President Trump and the NRA propose that teachers should be trained to use firearms and should have them in the classroom. • Texas and Utah already allow teachers to carry concealed handguns. Ohio teachers can already have firearms locked away only to be used in emergencies. • Knowing people in a school are armed would discourage a shooter from trying to attack the school. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Education Association President argues arming teachers does not prevent gun violence in the first place. • Teachers already have enough on their plates. • Arming teachers is a bad lesson for students and society.