

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



On February 14, 2018, a shooter armed with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle 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.

Students confronted lawmakers at a televised town hall. And their efforts gave the national debate on gun safety a new sense of urgency. 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. Of those 18 incidents, two were suicides, three were accidental shootings, and nine involved no injuries or deaths. 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. One of those two incidents was a 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech University. The other was the infamous shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. Over the years, lawmakers have responded to these traumatic events, and the public has experienced disagreement about what should be done.

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 reads, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” In 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court held that this amendment means an individual has the right to own firearms for lawful purposes, but it is not an absolute right. The government may impose reasonable regulations on gun ownership. And ownership does not have to do with an individual’s membership in a “well-regulated militia.”

Federal Law

Given the individual right to own guns, what has Congress done over the years about school



Wikimedia Commons

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. Anyone who otherwise has a legal right in their state or city to possess a gun may do so in a school zone. For example, police officers are allowed to possess firearms, as are local residents on private property. And as long as a gun is unloaded and properly locked away, or used in a school-sponsored program, then it is allowed within a school zone.

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. The GFSA does allow local educational authorities to modify expulsions when it sees fit. In certain circumstances, guns that are lawfully locked away in a vehicle or even on school property are allowed.

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).

State Law

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 (CCW permits). States have different requirements for CCW permits, but all states allow people to get them. 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.

Proposed Policies

The fact of gun violence at schools has sparked many different proposals to solve the problem. Below are five of the main policy proposals to either change or enhance the laws described above.

School Resource Officers

Public schools have had trained SROs on their campuses since as far back as 1953. The GFSA law in 1994, however, led to an increase in the use of SROs. As you have learned, the Department of Justice authorized more funding for SROs on K-12 campuses in 2013. They are essentially police officers for schools.

Supporters of this proposal argue that SROs have decreased crime on K-12 campuses. In 2001, a survey showed that 90 percent of SROs stop between one and 25 violent acts on campuses each year. A general decrease in violence at schools nationwide since the mid-1990s coincides with an increased presence of SROs at schools. And often SROs act as informal counselors and educators at the schools where they work.

Some critics of this proposal argue that SROs are not responsible for the decline of crime in schools. Crime in general has declined since the mid-1990s. And critics site cases in which SROs have treated misbehaving juveniles the same as adult offenders. Many disciplinary problems handled by SROs, they argue, are better handled by a referral to the principal’s office.

Some critics also argue that SROs are simply not effective. The school in Parkland, Florida, had an

SRO on duty when the attack happened. There were two SROs present during the Columbine shooting that left 13 dead. Supporters, however, argue that school districts can simply require better training for SROs assigned to their schools.

Active Shooter Drills

Many school districts have adopted the practice of active shooter drills on their school campuses. An “active shooter situation” is one in which a person is actively trying to shoot other people. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security adds that active shooters are typically “attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area.” A drill is intended to prepare students for this situation at their school, just as a fire drill prepares them for a fire or natural disaster.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence support the use of active shooter drills. But the NASP does not endorse one particular type of drill. The NASP encourages “traditional lockdowns” as the foundation for any effective active shooter drill. A lockdown typically involves immediate locking of all exterior and interior doors and gates.

Students and teachers must remain where they are and away from all windows as law enforcement comes to the school.

President Donald Trump opposes active shooter drills. He has said, “I don't like it. I'd much rather have a hardened school.” Some parents, too, have complained in various school districts that these drills have made their children feel traumatized. The NASP warns that the success of these drills depends on the training, calmness, and sensitivity of the school staff.

Gun Control

This proposal is really a series of proposals. And not all gun control supporters agree on which proposals are best. But as the name implies, 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. Many of the Parkland school students made public demands for gun control measures.

After mass shootings, gun control advocates often renew demands to ban the type of weapon that was used in the shooting. In Parkland, the shooter used an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. In Las Vegas in 2017, the shooter used a device called a “bump stock,” which allowed him to make a semi-automatic rifle function like a fully automatic machine gun.

Other proposed gun control policies include waiting periods after gun sales (to delay a person's ability to have a gun immediately); background checks to restrict people with any violent criminal record from owning guns; raising the minimum age to buy a handgun to 21; and expanded mental health training for teachers and school staff to better recognize young people with serious issues. The National Parent-Teacher Association believes youth safety will come from a combination of gun control measures, including requiring safety locks on guns to protect young children and increasing penalties for anyone who sells a gun to a minor.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) is a lobbying organization for both gun owners and gun manufacturers. The NRA argues that the Second Amendment makes most gun control laws unconstitutional, especially federal laws. The NRA has about five million members and spends \$250 million dollars each year to promote lawful gun ownership and influence lawmakers. President Trump has supported the NRA and received praise from the organization, but he has also supported banning the sale of bump stocks.

Many in the NRA and others who are generally opposed to gun control do believe that improving

mental health treatment will stop people from illegally using guns. They also support increased criminal penalties for illegal gun use. They believe this will deter would-be criminals from becoming active shooters.

Arming Teachers and School Staff

In 2012, after Sandy Hook, NRA President Wayne LaPierre famously stated, “The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” Therefore, he proposed that states and localities should pass laws that allow teachers to carry firearms on campus. President Trump has echoed the NRA position.

In March 2018, President Trump appointed U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to lead a commission to come up with ways to keep schools safe. DeVos supports allowing teachers trained in firearms to carry them into classrooms. In fact, DeVos’s home state of Michigan has allowed trained teachers to carry concealed handguns in some districts.

Should the AR-15 Be Banned?

In 1994, Congress passed a law banning the sale of “assault weapons,” or “military-style” semi-automatic rifles, including the AR-15 later used in the Parkland, Florida, mass shooting. The law expired in 2004. After the Parkland shooting, many renewed a push to ban assault weapons once again. Since the AR-15 is popular among gun-buyers, the debate sometimes centers on banning that weapon in particular. The AR-15 is a civilian version of a military firearm. It is a semi-automatic rifle meaning it loads and fires a new round with each squeeze of the trigger. Because the AR-15 fires high-velocity, low-caliber ammunition, its bullets can “tumble” through a person’s body, often ripping apart organs and even bones. The AR-15 can be fitted with high-capacity magazines holding up to 30 bullets.



Main Arguments

- The AR-15 is unnecessary for any lawful purpose, such as hunting, sport-shooting, or home defense. Civilians do not need military-style weaponry.
- The 2008 Supreme Court decision in *D.C. v. Heller* allowed for banning “dangerous and unusual weapons.” The AR-15 is especially dangerous and unusual. It fires ammunition at high-velocity and a shooter can fire hundreds of rounds in a very short time span.
- Many military veterans support banning semi-automatic rifles like the AR-15. “I recognize the power of firearms. I’ve seen what they can do,” Army veteran Dennis Magnasco says. “And it makes me sick to know that we have high school kids seeing this in their schools.”

Main Counterarguments

- Many opponents of an assault-weapons ban argue that there are many semi-automatic rifles used for hunting and sport and the AR-15 is just a type of semi-automatic rifle. Jeff Sellers, a professional hunter, says, “A weapon cannot assault; people assault.” Law-abiding civilians should be able to own semi-automatic rifles.
- The 1994 assault-weapons ban did not eliminate assault weapons. In fact, it caused a spike in sales of semi-automatic rifles just before the ban went into effect. Today, there are already 10-12 million AR-15 rifles alone in private hands in the U.S. A ban would not affect those rifles.
- The 2008 *Heller* decision should not apply to semi-automatic rifles – or even fully automatic rifles (e.g., machine guns). The NRA supports the position that *Heller* prohibits weapons not commonly used by civilians, like poison gas, tanks, or artillery. AR-15s are no more “unusual” than a pistol or shotgun.

Texas and Utah, as well, allow teachers to carry concealed handguns in schools. And in Ohio, schools may have firearms locked away, accessible only with authorized thumbprints, for emergency use by school staff. In March 2018, Florida passed a law allowing teachers to undergo law enforcement training.

Many oppose these approaches because they believe the practice is ineffective. National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen Garcia says, “We need solutions that will keep guns out of the hands of those who use them to massacre innocent children and educators. Arming teachers does nothing to prevent that.”

Opponents also believe that arming teachers is, in itself, a bad lesson for students and society. Many have called it “dystopian” to arm teachers. A dystopia is the opposite of a utopia, the opposite of a perfect world.

Writing & Discussion

1. In your opinion, which set of laws, federal or state, seem to address the problems of gun violence more effectively? Use evidence from the article in your answer.
2. Of the proposed policies to address gun violence at schools, which seem most effective? Why?
3. What is your opinion of gun control? Adam Lankford, a professor of criminology at the University of Alabama, has found that countries with higher rates of gun ownership experience more mass shootings. In the United States, there are 88.8 guns per 100 people in the country. Does this statistic affect your opinion of gun control? Why or why not?