Will Strict Gun Laws Stop Mass Shootings in Schools?

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Public Administration in Public Sector Management and Leadership

By

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California State University, Northridge
Dedication

Dedicated to All Who Lost Their Lives to Gun Violence
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Abstract

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Master of Public Administration, Public Sector Management and Leadership

The firearm-related mass shooting incidents in schools often reignite the debate on gun rights and school safety. Some widely publicized mass school shootings have high mortality rates and fatalities, while the majority are less deadly and not noted widely, having fewer than two deaths or no fatalities. However, their effects are devastating as they leave lasting social and psychological impacts on children, their families, and others in communities.

The author aims to understand if implementing strict gun laws is the best strategy to stop school mass shootings. A qualitative analysis of peer-reviewed articles was conducted to research the significance of gun ownership and gun control policies on school mass shootings. The study finds that more permissive firearm laws and higher rates of gun ownership were associated with higher rates of school shootings. While other strategies can prevent shootings in schools, implementing stringent gun laws can effectively stop children and youths from accessing firearms, a crucial factor in stopping mass shootings in schools. Also, data from the PEW research center indicate that most Americans favor strict gun laws to reduce gun violence.
Stringent gun laws include safe storage of guns, rigorous background checks, and a ban on high-capacity magazines and assault weapons (Pew Research Center, 2022).
Introduction

Mass school shootings cut short lives, cause injuries, and have lasting social and psychological impacts on children, educators, parents, and others in communities. Some widely publicized mass school shootings had high mortality rates and fatalities, like Columbine High School in 1999, Robb Elementary School in 2022, and Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. The majority are less deadly and not publicized widely, having fewer than two deaths or no fatalities. However, these terrifying firearm-related incidences often reignite the debate on gun rights and school safety.

Since 2012, the number of school shootings resulting in at least the death or injury of one victim is more than 600. In the first quarter of this year, 2023, a school shooting occurred at The Covenant School in Nashville, with 6 losing their lives, raising the number of victims to 74 (Gilligan & Lurye, 2023). Research shows 27 school shootings have happened this year, resulting in injuries or deaths, with more shootings reported in 2022 than in other years at 51, with 34 deaths and more than 43,000 children exposed to gunfire while at school. School shootings reported in 2021 were 35, while both 2019 and 2018 had 24 each. The Washington Post school shootings database indicates that there have been more than 185 deaths from gun violence at school since the 1999 Columbian massacre (Education Week, 2023; Sandy Hook Promise, N.d). Firearm deaths in and outside school grounds for children and teens occur at higher than drowning. Students exposed to gun violence are more than 338,000, raising concerns about the rise in gun violence. While it is true that detecting signs of gun violence can help prevent and reverse the rising trend, as the U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security research suggests, it is essential for legislation to enact strict gun laws to stop mass shootings in schools (Rand, n.d 2018).
As some states ease rules on firearm acquisition, more households purchase them, increasing the likelihood of gun violence and resulting in more legal issues. Around 4.6 million US children live in homes with at least one gun that is loaded and unlocked. Most parents wrongly believe that their children have no idea where they keep the weapons. However, when these weapons are stored improperly, children and teens can easily access them and engage in violence and suicide, causing deaths at home and in school. The mass shooters in schools use guns from home, relatives, or friends. Studies from the Secret Service and Department of Education indicate that 93% of mass school shooting attacks were planned in advance, and the shooters shared threatening messages or images (United States Secret Service, n.d 2020). Usually, gun violence at school impacts minority students more than their peers. Despite the factors contributing to mass shootings, children, educators, and others in schools have a right to be safe.

Therefore, many organizations have called for strict gun laws as proven to prevent loss of life resulting from gun violence. Though people have too many guns, hindering complete gun violence prevention, some states with stringent gun laws have lower rates than others. However, even states like California that lead in gun safety have high incidents of school shootings at 53, followed by Texas at 52 and Illinois at 45 (Gilligan & Lurye, 2023). These gun laws should be evidence-based, targeting problem areas through research, such as high-risk people and situations. Some policy actions can include background checks, magazine limits, and secure storage. Real change requires engaging all stakeholders involved in school safety to enact strict gun reforms that enhance safety and incorporate other programs and policies that address the risk of violence, such as reducing aggression and isolation and closing gaps in mental health services.
Background

The US has experienced mass school shootings for decades. This complex and multifaceted issue has escalated and raised concerns for the public and policymakers regarding gun rights, control and violence, and zero-tolerance policies. Violence on school grounds began as early as the eighteenth century according to the K12 academics database, the earliest known incident happening on July 26, 1764, the Pontiac's Rebellion school massacre. During this incident at a schoolhouse in Pennsylvania, the schoolmaster and about nine children were murdered by four Lenape American Indians ((K12academics, N.d).

Initially, school violence involved shootings, stabbings with knives, arson attacks, or explosives targeting specific individuals, such as teachers or fellow students. However, this crisis has evolved since the 1900s to include holding people hostage and shooting randomly. School shootings in the 1900s include the June 12, 1976, California State University Fullerton massacre that left seven dead and two wounded; May 18, 1927, Bath School, Bath massacre that killed 45 people; August 1, 1966, The University of Texas tower shooting where 14 died, and 31 got wounded, and January 29, 1979, Grover Cleveland Elementary School Shootings with two killed and nine wounded (Austin History Center N.d).

The deadliest school shootings in the 2000s upwards include April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech shooting, where 32 died and 17 sustained injuries; February 14, 2017, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting that left 17 students dead and 16 injured; October 1, 2015, Umpqua Community College shooting having nine people killed and seven wounded, April 2, 2012 Oikos University shooting, killing seven and wounding three, and March 21, 2005 Red Lake Indian Reservation shooting where three died outside school, and seven killed and five injured at Red Lake High School (K12academics, N.d). The April 20, 1999, well-planned
massacre at Columbine High School left 21 wounded people and 15, including the two shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, 18 and 17 years of age, respectively, dead. This tragic event, which went viral and raised concerns about personal safety, security, gun control, and mental illness, remains in people's consciousness.

Often, school mass shooters plan an attack before committing suicide or getting arrested. Though it is a noticeable trend, research by Mother Jones shows that the Columbine massacre has inspired more than 100 plots and mass shooting attacks in about 30 states, with at least 18 targeting to strike on the day of the Columbine High School massacre anniversary (Follman, 2019). The stark behavioral patterns exhibited by most perpetrators show the desire for notoriety and media attention- to become famous so people will know their names. Some perpetrators view the Columbine shooters as heroes and even desire to outdo them besides copying their style. It was the case on April 19, 2023, at Forest High School in Ocala when Sky Bouche, the shooter and former student, shot through a classroom door, causing injury to one student. He had researched and planned to attack the school to become famous. Though troubled, Bouche expressed his fascination resonates with the Columbine effect. From interrogation, he revealed that he acquired the shotgun online from a private seller without a background check in 2018, one week after the Parkland High School shooting. This example represents many other mass shootings inside and outside schools, where the shooters, like the one in Midland-Odessa, Texas, can purchase guns through private sales even when they have failed background checks, disallowing them from owning firearms.

When mass shootings occur, law enforcement moves in to end the threat and ensure people are safe. However, there are instances when delays occur, which can raise the likelihood of higher casualties and injuries, as was the case at Columbine High School and the 2022 Robb
Elementary and 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shootings. Such instances include the chaos and lack of communication as terrified students and other people run to safety.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the number of grade 9-12 students in the US who possessed firearms at school during the 2019 to 2020 school year was 2,400. The rate of students aged between 12 years and 18 years who did not need adult supervision to access a loaded gun in the same year was 4%. Among the proposed preventative measures are those emphasizing that firearms are stored securely in the home. The guns used in most shootings are legal and often taken from the house, like in the case of the 2005 Red Lake High School shooting and the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

Gun ownership has cultural significance for most Americans compared to other parts of the world. The US Constitution's second amendment includes gun rights, allowing people to possess these weapons with the potential of becoming deadly. Child Access Prevention Laws vary depending on the state and severity of its laws. Some states impose criminal liability for guns stored carelessly and given intentionally to minors (Gun Policy in America, 2023). Others impose criminal liability only if children access carelessly stored firearms and inflict harm on others or cause death.

Whenever a mass shooting happens, Congress will zero in on various firearm-related legislations, but they fail due to a lack of political will to end gun violence. For example, in 2018, after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, gridlock at the national level made it difficult for lawmakers to raise the minimum age, allowing one to buy rifles and enforce background checks as pressure mounted from the National Rifle Association. Earlier, a similar attempt failed to gunner the required votes in Congress on a bipartisan bill proposing a ban on assault weapons and high-gun magazines and expansion on background checks after the 2012
Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre (Rutledge, 2023). If Congress had taken meaningful steps to enact strict gun laws earlier, most mass shootings, including those in schools, would not take place or at least occur at a minimal level. The Biden administration signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act in 2022 to remove the "gun show loophole" by restricting the sale of firearms as it allows massive private sales without performing background checks. Currently, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives licensing brick-and-mortar gun dealers, estimated at 80,000, noted that gun sales outside the system free of background checks have increased rapidly.

While many support this move, critics like the National Rifle Association oppose it and can challenge it in court. The organization, which lobbies for firearm manufacturing interests, expressed concerns over the infringement of gun rights for law-abiding citizens and the abuse that may arise from restricting lawful gun purchases. Implementing statewide gun laws can impact gun ownership and influence mass shootings. Studies show that more permissive gun laws combined with greater gun ownership can result in potentially higher mass shooting rates. The divergence of these laws, which means making them more restrictive, has shown decreased rates of mass shootings, a strong indication that restricting gun laws at state levels has a great potential of stopping mass shootings in schools.
Methodology

Thoroughly conducting the research involved scrutinizing pertinent scholarly articles systematically. The articles selected were up-to-date, less than five years to increase their relevance and validity on the issue of school mass shootings and enacting strict gun laws. For an effective literature review, the articles involved scholars in fields related to public administration, including lawyers, political analysts, and other stakeholders. Policy-making involves evidence-based research for effectiveness.

Database Selection

A comprehensive exploration of existing literature on gun laws and school shootings initially generated 17,500 articles on Google Scholar. These numbers included books and peer-reviewed articles from other databases, such as the BMJ, Cambridge organization, and CDC sourced from the university library’s resources. Google Scholar has articles from various databases covering a diverse array of studies related to public administration.

Search strategy

Streamlining the search involved using various keywords and Boolean operators to ensnare the most relevant studies. The cherry-picked keywords incorporated terms associated with "school mass shootings," "strict gun laws," "Child Access Prevention Laws," and "mass school shootings." With the deft utilization of operators like "AND," "OR," and "NOT," the Boolean method was useful in finessing the search results, which ensured flawless alignment of articles as it captured necessary pivotal facets relating to the research question. Choosing keywords meticulously and using Boolean operators when handling a vast repository of available literature is crucial. Since scholarly databases contain an extensive array of articles, judicious
keyword selection allows researchers to narrow down and determine studies with profound insights aligning with the research objective of the specific inquiry.

This strategy optimizes the search process and helps find articles and other literary works significant to the study. It assists in providing coherent and in-depth information for a well-structured, purposeful review. This process is crucial in making conclusions that are valid and credible.

**Screening process**

This screening and elimination process is crucial, guaranteeing that the articles retained for evaluation are solely germane to stopping mass school shootings through strict gun laws. Screening ensures that the articles align closely with the research objectives. Selection would entail articles written by experts, peer-reviewed, that are most recent but not earlier than 2019. These articles must also cite credible sources of data and be objective. It's an indispensable stage in preserving integrity and quality by precluding articles that do not provide insight into the predetermined criteria. Also, it ensures that research maintains the intended trajectory and provides a framework for analyzing and synthesizing information with precision, thus upholding the research's focus, credibility, and validity.

**Article selection**

The screening process selected 15 articles that satisfied the stringent criteria for gun laws and mass shootings, particularly in schools. They enrich the research inquiry comprehensively by providing unique insights, perspectives, and data crucial in drawing quality, relevant, and accurate conclusions and generating profound contributions to this area of concern. The themes will include loopholes in legislation, gun ownership, gun violence in schools, the
effects of gun violence in schools, and the impact of strict gun laws on school mass shootings.

These themes recur in most sources and help compare and validate the data.
Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this study shows that strict gun laws can reduce school mass shootings. The multifaceted nature of responses to school gun violence indicates that while establishing school safety measures is crucial, it can become more effective if students do not have access to firearms (Livingston et al., 2019). Those against strict gun laws cite individual rights stated in the Constitution, while those in support favor laws that can preserve an individual's right to life, as gun violence has become a public health issue.

Gun violence in schools

According to Katsiyannis et al. (2023), US school shootings occur every four weeks. Firearm deaths in and outside school grounds for children and teens occur at higher rates than drowning. Students exposed to gun violence are more than 338,000, raising concerns about the rise in gun violence (Sandy Hook Promise, N.d). As the U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security research suggests, it is essential for legislation to enact strict gun laws to stop mass shootings in schools. Studies from the Secret Service and Department of Education indicate that 93% of mass school shooting attacks were planned in advance, and the shooters shared threatening messages or images (Sandy Hook Promise, N.d). As Figure 1 shows, school mass shootings were low during Covid-19 in 2020 as schools shut down. However, they increased rapidly in 2021, with those of 2022 exceeding the ones in 2017.
**Figure 1:** 2017 – 2022 School Shootings, Mass Shootings, and Mass School Shootings Across the USA

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the number of grade 9-12 students in the US who possessed firearms at school during the 2019 to 2020 school year was 2,400. The rate of students aged between 12 years and 18 years who did not need adult supervision to access a loaded gun in the same year was 4%. Among the proposed preventative measures are those emphasizing that firearms are stored securely in the home. Price and Khubchandani (2019) found that 1 to 10% of students have carried firearms to school, indicating a common theme related to gun-carrying behavior. The study exposes that such a problem stems from behavioral issues which are a result of exposure to criminal activity such as drug abuse or guns at home. The guns used in most shootings are legal and often taken from the house, like in the case of the 2005 Red Lake High School shooting and the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary...
School shooting. Studies conducted on firearm storage highlight worrying trends in homes having firearms and children, where 55% said they had guns in unlocked places while 43% kept those without triggers in unlocked areas. Other findings indicate that safer storage most likely happens when the child is less than 13 years old (King et al., 2020). About half of those owning firearms kept the weapons loaded, unlocked, or both. Guns can increase suicide and unintentional harm or death among children. Recent research has shown positive results related to safe firearm storage as it can prevent up to 32% of self-inflicted firearm deaths, intentional or unintentional, for youths below 19.

In their study, Joseph and Christopher (2023) found that high-profile school shootings attract media attention and public support for implementing security measures, including arming staff with firearms. These strategies aim to ensure armed staff can deter or subdue perpetrators quickly before law enforcement arrives. Other strategies to increase school safety include zero-tolerance policies, school resource officers (SROs), and other physical security measures (Price & Khubchandani, 2019). Research conducted by Katsiyannis et al. (2023) indicates that in the school year 2019 to 2020, most schools had SROs, 55% of elementary schools, 84% of high schools, and 81% of middle schools. Security measures implemented in most schools included 97% use of controlled access, 91% security camera use, and picture ID or badge at 77%. However, the increased presence of SROs has not effectively reduced school shooting severity. It is the type of firearm that perpetrators use that is linked closely to the number of deaths and injuries (Livingston et al., 2019). The researchers recommend that the government reconsider which firearms individuals can access.

Similarly, Price and Khubchandani (2019) identified three levels using the public health prevention paradigm that covers diseases and injuries that can address school shootings. The first
and most effective, cost-beneficial level that can eliminate school gun violence is the primary prevention level, which involves preventing youths from gaining access to guns. The secondary prevention level aims at detecting and deterring youths who have access to guns from carrying them to school. As Rothe (2022) suggests, the different categories of security measures can include limiting access or entry to the school building through gates, sign-in requirements, and identification cards. The researcher also states several measures in other categories, including prohibiting weapons in schools, increasing surveillance, and reacting to crises through drills and telephones in classrooms. They suggest that while creating a safe climate is essential, children and adolescents without access to firearms can make these strategies more effective.

**Gun ownership**

Gun ownership has cultural significance for most Americans compared to other parts of the world. In their research, Oraka et al. (2019) examined the relationship between gun ownership and the advocacy for strict gun policies in the US. They explored factors influencing gun ownership and control measures, including geographic, political, and sociodemographic. Their findings show that men, rural people, and older adults had a higher gun ownership rate. These findings correlate with similar ones, showing that those residing in rural areas have higher rates of gun ownership due to hunting and recreational activities (PEW, 2023). Political affiliation played a significant role in the prediction of gun ownership and advocacy for strict measures, as conservatives or Republicans had a higher chance of owning guns without supporting gun control measures. Research shows there is a political divide on gun control issues. While Republicans mostly oppose stricter gun control measures, Democrats usually support them (PEW, 2018).
According to a survey by Pew Research Center (2023), about 45% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents owned guns compared to only 20% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning individuals. Also, about 47% of rural areas have guns compared to 20% in urban areas and 30% in suburbs. For men, the rate is 40% compared to 25% for women, with 38% of gun owners being White, 24% Black, 20% Hispanic, and Asian Americans at 10%.

Around 4.6 million US children live in homes with at least one gun that is loaded and unlocked (Sandy Hook Promise, N.d). Most parents wrongly believe that their children have no idea where they keep the weapons. However, when these weapons are stored improperly, children and teens can easily access them and engage in violence and suicide, causing deaths at home and in school.

The US Constitution’s Second Amendment includes gun rights, allowing people to possess these weapons with the potential of becoming deadly. While many support stringent gun laws, critics like the National Rifle Association oppose them and can challenge them in court (PEW, 2023).

The organization, which lobbies for firearm manufacturing interests, expressed concerns over the infringement of gun rights for law-abiding citizens and the abuse that may arise from restricting lawful gun purchases. Implementing statewide gun laws can impact gun ownership and influence mass shootings (Zoller & Casteel, 2022).
Figure 2: June 2023 Survey of US Adults Saying They Own Guns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personally own a gun</th>
<th>Don't own a gun but someone else in their household does</th>
<th>NET Gun in household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 18-29</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
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<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rep/Lean Rep</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conserv</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mod/Lib</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Dem/Lean Dem</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>Cons/Mod</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Research Center (2023)

Loopholes in legislation

People can obtain guns even when they do not meet the legal requirement to buy one when there are gaps in legislation. For example, those who wish to purchase a firearm without undergoing a background check can get one from an unlicensed seller who sells them without performing these checks. Also, most online transactions involve unlicensed dealers who are
unchecked and unregulated (Brady, n.p). Similarly, the gun show loophole involves unlicensed private sellers selling firearms without performing background checks since federal law permits them. These unregulated sales occurring during gun shows where gun vendors, both licensed and unlicensed, sell guns at various venues increase the likelihood of gun violence. In their study, Ricart et al. (2022) highlight a 2017 analysis of gun shows occurring in California and Nevada between 2005 and 2013. The results indicated that gun shows in Nevada, where the gun laws are not strict, resulted in high rates of injury locally after the shows were held. However, there was not an increase in firearm-related injuries in California due to its strict policies.

Moreover, Ricart et al. (2022) analyzed The National Rifle Association Magazine and the Gun Show Trader and Shooting Illustrator websites and found that the number of gun shows advertised from 2011 to 2019 was 20,691. Thus, every year, there are 2,299 gun shows as the average. From their analysis, 2017 had the highest number of gun shows promoted and advertised with a record-breaking 2704 gun shows. The number of gun shows fluctuated slightly for some years, while in others, they increased rapidly. During the Covid-19 pandemic, straw purchases which involves someone who purchases a gun for someone who is prohibited by law from processing one continued in the US. The study suggests that the demand for guns in the US is high, with gun shows playing a crucial role in fulfilling these needs. States and municipalities bordering those with lenient gun laws may still experience increased gun violence even when they have strict policies in place. As Brady (n.d) states, about 90% of guns involved in violence are from about 5% of licensed gun dealers. While dealing with problematic dealers can prevent these sales, the Tiahrt Amendment, which prohibits the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) from requiring gun dealers to submit inventories, makes it challenging to know who they are.
In addition to the loophole in gun shows, federal law and some states permit temporary firearm loans, transfer of weapons, and juvenile purchase of long guns from unlicensed dealers. These long guns include rifles and shotguns. A study by Livingston et al. (2019) highlights rifles and shotguns as strongly linked to fatalities and casualties in school violence. Also, 1994 to 2018 reports by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that firearm related injuries leading to death were responsible for 95% of multiple-victim school-associated youth homicides. Research indicates that the perpetrators got most of the firearms that they used in school shootings from their homes (Katsiyannis et al. 2023; Sandy Hook Promise, n.d). Also, the shootings were severe when older individuals orchestrated and implemented them. The findings suggest preventative measures beyond school settings. Child safety advocates support the need for the federal government to raise the minimum age and strict regulations that prevent children from getting access to guns in the home.

Other gaps in the legislation include the absence of protection in all domestic abuse cases on a federal level and the lack of substantial data on the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) database, resulting from underfunding and underreporting. Though the 1996 amendment, the Lautenberg Amendment, does not allow those convicted of domestic abuse or other protective orders to own guns, some not identified as legal spouses or guardians and parents can still access them (Brady, n.p). NICS has lapses in their reports, resulting from unauthorized individuals purchasing guns that end up being used for criminal activities. Following the mass killing of church worshippers in Texas by a former US Air Force airman, the 2017 Fix NICS Act came into effect, allowing legal action against federal agencies that failed to meet NICS requirements on reporting. The April 19, 2023 shooter at Forest High School in Ocala Sky Bouche revealed that he acquired the shotgun online from a private seller without a
background check in 2018, one week after the Parkland High School shooting (Follman, 2019). This example represents many other mass shootings inside and outside schools, where the shooters, like the one in Midland-Odessa, Texas, can purchase guns through private sales even when they have failed background checks, disallowing them from owning firearms.

In 2018, after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, gridlock at the national level made it difficult for lawmakers to raise the minimum age following pressure from the National Rifle Association. Earlier, a similar attempt failed to garner the required votes in Congress on a bipartisan bill proposing a ban on assault weapons and high-gun magazines and an expansion on background checks after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre (Rutledge, 2023). If Congress had taken meaningful steps to enact strict gun laws earlier, most mass shootings, including those in schools, would not have taken place or at least would have occurred at a minimal level. According to Katsiyannis et al. (2023), Congress passed landmark legislation after the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde. The Biden administration signed the bipartisan safer communities act in 2022 to remove the "gun show loophole" by restricting the sale of firearms as it allows massive private sales without performing background checks. Currently, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives licensing brick-and-mortar gun dealers, estimated at 80,000, noted that gun sales outside the system free of background checks have increased rapidly (Rutledge, 2023). The bipartisan safer communities act enhances background checks and provides states with funds to implement intervention programs like red flag laws to strengthen laws on gun purchases and trafficking.

**Effects of gun violence in schools**

Gun violence in schools has various ramifications, from legal to academic and social-emotional. The substantial increase in school shootings raises concerns about students' well-
being and mental health. Katsiyannis et al. 2023 found that frequent exposure to frightening stories and images of violence and shooter drills in schools can induce trauma in students. Exposure to these incidents raises many questions as students struggle to understand why they happen and ways to prevent them, as policies put in may not be effective. As gun violence continues, these students require mental health support from the school personnel during and after school mass shootings occur (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2020). The zero-tolerance policies to curtail gun-related violence in schools and other incidents of violence like bullying and threats have exacerbated the situation instead of effectively dealing with violence in schools (Duke, 2022).

Moreover, the zero-tolerance policies also have detrimental effects, resulting in students missing school due to suspensions, with some undergoing corporal punishment, physical and mechanical restraining, and seclusion. These punitive and exclusionary measures have detrimental effects in the long run, including high dropout rates, delinquency, and post-traumatic stress. According to Katsiyannis et al. 2023, the rate of school-related arrests increased by 5%, while referrals made to law enforcement increased by 12% for the school years 2015 to 2016 and 2017 to 2018. For the school year 2017 to 2018, the number of students arrested was about 50,000, and for those referred to law enforcement, 230,000. The referrals involved non-criminal offenses and, just like school mass shootings, disproportionately affected minority students, including non-Whites and those with disabilities (Cox et al., 2023). Such incidents increase societal costs and aggressive behaviors and cause psychological and physical harm to students.
School mass shootings as traumatic events impact the mental health of victims, their families, and the community, which leads to increased psychological conditions like depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Research also shows that the high media attention these incidents receive has indirect effects as they expose and intensify fear and anxiety, making students feel vulnerable even in areas where the incident did not occur (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2020). The researchers found that students may find it difficult to adjust and exhibit avoidance behaviors. There is a high possibility of school personnel underestimating the students' distress and overestimating their resilience after a shooting. Also, students' well-being is threatened when adults experience difficulty adjusting after the traumatic events, as they may think their teachers lack what it takes to keep them safe (SAMHSA, 2023). While school mass shootings have
resounding consequences for student's well-being and development, most schools lack adequate resources, staff, and support services to meet these demands due to a lack of funds (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). However, students look to adults to provide guidance and support, which requires educators, counselors, and other stakeholders to employ various strategies to ensure students feel safe and normalcy returns.

As Holloway et al. (2023) highlight in their study on how gun violence impacts early childhood development, exposure to it has later physical health and psychiatric problems that extend into adulthood. For many children and adolescents, direct and indirect exposure occurs through various ways, including school, home, and media. Even when in close proximity to firearm-related incidents, the risk for adverse outcomes remains high. Traumatic implications go beyond immediate survivors of gun violence and affect other support systems, such as the victims’ families and communities. The researchers advocate for more research targeting this specific population to help parents and caregivers ensure their children's development remains optimal amid constant and unavoidable stressors and exposures.

**Implications of strict gun laws on school mass shootings**

The recent epidemic of school mass shootings has led to a focus on various approaches that can prevent and respond to school violence and increase school safety. Among them are legal measures, including enacting strict gun control laws and vigorous enforcement of existing laws on gun control; enacting laws that hold parents liable for the actions of their children in case of violence; having special courts and ways to handle students facing weapons offenses; implementing strict school disciplinary codes; reforms of specific acts that can allow expulsion of students caught violating laws on weapons in schools; and finding alternatives to place students facing weapons violations to ensure they continue schooling without disruptions.
Gun violence has profound implications for schools, students, and the public due to increased fatalities and injuries, making it a pressing national public health issue (PEW, 2023). Child Access Prevention Laws vary depending on the state and severity of its laws. Some states impose criminal liability for guns stored carelessly and given intentionally to minors. Others impose criminal liability only if children access carelessly stored firearms and inflict harm on others or cause death.

Besides firearm access being a critical factor contributing to school shootings, other factors increase the likelihood of school shootings occurring, including neighborhood disadvantage and crime rates in the community (Joseph & Christopher, 2023). Areas with fewer school shooting incidents had those purchasing firearms undergoing background checks and higher expenditure on mental health and K-12 education. Similarly, Reeping et al. (2022) conducted a time-series analysis to identify factors that may result in intentional school shootings. They used school shooting data from the Washington Post and K-12 schools for over two decades. The data for the Washington Post included acts of intentional interpersonal gunfire occurring in K-12 schools, while K-12 data included any attempted mass shooting incidents occurring in K-12 schools. The analysis aimed to measure the link between K-12 school shootings, state firearm laws, and ownership permissiveness. Their findings reveal a positive connection between firearm laws and gun ownership, which are more permissive to active school shootings (Reeping et al., 2022). From their findings, states having permissive laws on firearms have the potential to contribute to higher rates of shootings that occur in K-12 schools.
In social constructionism theory, individual learning and development occur through interactions with others such that society and cultures shape one’s view of reality, making human development a collaborative process. Social constructionism focuses on how certain populations depend on power and a certain idea that has been created and accepted by a society to shape policy-making (Ingram et al., 2019). In this theory, there is a divide between the scientific population and policymakers with the risk of differing views (Nickerson, 2023). The information that research presents through social constructionism relies on the political context and can potentially reinforce certain policies on a targeted population or challenge the existing ones.

Therefore, social constructions shape policy processes and outcomes that politicians adopt as they draw on emotional and value-laden symbols and images instead of objectively representing realities (Ingram et al., 2019). The different social constructions result in different policy designs. The social constructionism theory is relevant in degenerative policy-making systems which legitimizes manipulative communication and use of political power. Unequal political power distribution, with social constructions then separate the deserving from the undeserving. Institutional culture legitimizes strategic and manipulative communication patterns and political power use. Gun control policy in America encompasses heated rhetoric and emotional appeals, especially after school mass shootings occur. Also, it is characterized by intense partisanship as Democrats and gun control advocates support strict gun policies while Conservatives and gun rights advocates prefer less stringent gun policies (Schwartz, 2022). Most policy elites in gun policy debates focus on their own political gain, backing those they deem deserving while being tough on the undeserving to secure votes and other support at the expense of good public policy.
Social constructionism framework

The four target populations include advantaged groups like gun control advocates, contenders like gun rights advocates, dependents like students and parents deemed politically weak, and deviants, such as criminals and school shooters. Social constructions consist of stereotype groups with various links pointing to a chain of evidence, including politics and culture. These links lead to the debate on gun control which often involves political inactivity on the issue centering on competing cultural values revolving around the Second Amendment (Ingram et al., 2019). Thus, the political context in the conceptual framework directly involves gun policies and security that impact students and schools (Schneider & Ingram, 2019; Schwartz, 2022). Also, it involves the prevention and responses to school mass shootings, which can be accomplished through school safety. This discussion focuses on the extent, effects, and impact of school mass shootings on students, along with policies that can enhance their safety.

For instance, the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act addresses unsafe firearm acquisition, use, and storage by introducing stringent laws, including removing the gun show loophole and implementing new gun violence prevention policies (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). These measures disincentivize and inhibit gun ownership by children and other unsafe firearms users, creating policy burdens for this group while benefiting schools and the community as safety levels increase, saving lives.

This conceptual framework will be practical for this research due to various reasons. The social construction framework helps describe the issue of school mass shootings, which affects the population in school settings comprehensively and helps understand why strict gun laws can be the most effective way to solve this issue. It describes why the issue has persisted and why policies have failed to stop it from becoming rampant before and in recent times. This framework
is ideal for understanding school shootings' effects on students. The theory helps explore the policies that are not effective and why policymakers should reconsider certain policies that can solve the issue without negatively impacting the students, whose lives, well-being, and physical health are at risk. While emotional judgments are quick after school shootings, policymakers also exploit social and political preferences, thus creating policy designs that may not result in the most effective trajectory to address the issue at hand.
Findings and Analysis

Gun violence on school grounds continues to be a public health and social issue, with data for the past five years showing an upward trend. These patterns reflect the general issue of gun violence and school shooting deaths across the same period. The impacts on children and youth are profound as it disproportionately affects boys more than girls, though the gun deaths per capita for Black boys and girls is higher than any other ethnic or racial groups. In 2021, the rate of gun-related deaths was 12.0 per 100,000 among Black youths (Panchal, 2022). Although African Americans made up 16% of the total population in schools, their experience of school shootings is almost double compared to other ethnic backgrounds (Cox et al., 2023).

Despite school shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic tempering with gun violence during the 2020 school year, gun violence rates continue to increase with higher rates recorded. While they make up a small portion of gun-related deaths, these incidents negatively impact the mental health of children and communities, as they increase suicide risk, antidepressant use, and fear and anxiety. The PEW research center survey shows that parents, estimated at 32% having school-going children, are worried about shootings occurring at their school (Schaeffer, 2023).

Moreover, many Americans favor stringent gun laws as a practical way to reduce gun violence, including safe storage of guns, strict background checks, and a ban on high-capacity magazines and assault weapons. Data shows that about 58%, more than half of the population, favor strict gun laws compared to 15% who favor less strict laws on firearms (Schaeffer, 2023). Stanford scholars found that states with tighter policies and child prevention access laws have lower gun deaths and suicides among children and teenagers, with about 2.6 per 100,000 mortality rates for states with stricter laws and 5.0 per 100,000 for those with less strict laws, almost double (De Witte, 2022). These results indicate that school shootings and active school
shootings occur at higher rates in states with more permissive firearm laws and higher gun ownership rates.

The prevention of purchasing guns by the mentally ill, and raising the minimum age for one to be able to buy guns to 21 are amongst policies favored by both political parties on restricting gun access. Similarly, both parties oppose people without permits carrying concealed firearms. However, both parties have differences on several proposals, including banning high-capacity magazines and assault-style weapons, with the Democratic party being more in favor than the Republican party (Schaeffer, 2023). Also, most Republicans, almost two-thirds, favor educators and other school officials carrying guns in schools and people carrying concealed guns compared to less than a third of Democrats.

The recent response to increased gun violence in schools and the public in general, the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, implements changes in several areas, including school safety, mental health, and gun control (Searles, 2022). The legislation allocates funding and incentives for gun violence research and encourages ending the prolonged period of limited research on firearm-related deaths. However, opposition may arise from the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Conservatives. The NRA has often opposed gun policy reform and research projects investigating the adverse effects of gun ownership, including support for the Dickey Amendment to restrict the usage of federal funds for gun control. Therefore, such reforms can be more effective with concerted efforts from legislators and policymakers.
Policy Implications

Evidence-based decision-making results in good policies as it relies on data and facts to solve problems. This research involved a rigorous literature review to highlight how strict gun policies can effectively stop school mass shootings. The objectivity in analyzing the association between school shootings, gun ownership, and gun laws from previous literature ensures it upholds professional and ethical standards in research to enhance problem-solving and guide decision-making.

While confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring there is no potential harm to participants is essential in research, this study did not involve collecting first-hand information, and its objective was to analyze existing literature to help understand the effects of gun policies on school mass shootings. It has implications for educators, legislators, policymakers, advocacy, non-profit and for-profit organizations, such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the National Rifle Association, and Gun Free Kids. Gun violence in schools results in fatalities and injuries, besides psychological, social, and economic effects on those affected (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). The findings from this research highlight the effects of more permissive gun laws. Therefore, it allows policymakers and legislators to determine the inherent trade-offs necessary to reduce access to firearms by students and lower gun violence in schools.
Limitations

The research had several limitations as it derived data from existing scholarly and peer-reviewed journals and other published research using key search terms. Limitations occurred due to time constraints and the lengthy Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval required to analyze primary data. Measures of gun ownership or gun law permissiveness are at the state level, which limits the generalizability of results as there are no measures for levels lower than a state, like for a city or county. Research on the relationship between school mass shootings and gun ownership utilizes reasonable hypotheses, as state gun ownership rates are not measured directly but use a validated proxy, which is the data provided by the states into a database. This makes it plausible that the probability of children and adolescents accessing and using firearms to commit school shootings is higher in states with relatively high ownership of guns as access is easier. Also, despite previous studies using a time-series component spanning several years and making multiple covariate adjustments, there remains the possibility of biases from omitting variables and reverse causation. Future research should focus on specific laws and their relation to the onset of active school shootings and school mass shootings to establish how these policies work.
Recommendations

This research provides clear evidence that all states should implement strict firearm policies to address school mass shootings effectively. They include permit requirements, high-capacity magazines ban, and concealed firearm carrying elimination (Reeping et al., 2022). As higher rates of gun ownership can potentially increase the risk of school shootings, it is essential to increase accountability regarding the prevalence of gun ownership. Rigorous permit-to-purchase policies can limit high-risk individuals from accessing guns, and child access prevention laws can significantly reduce youth access to guns, thereby reducing unintentional school shootings and firearm suicide deaths. Similarly, large-capacity magazine bans can reduce lethality in school mass shootings, and increased accountability on gun sellers and owners regarding selling or transferring guns and who can access them can reduce firearm accessibility among children (Iwundu et al., 2022; Price & Khubchandani, 2019). Findings from previous literature highlight the multi-faceted nature of gun violence in schools and the responses to stop it. Thus, it requires concerted efforts at various state levels to ensure the recommended policies result in meaningful responses.

Similarly, as schools consider the best ways to enhance safety, those in states with relatively higher rates of gun ownership and more permissive gun laws should consider the potential for increased access to firearms by school-aged children in the community. There are several strategies that schools can implement to prevent gun violence, such as implementing firearm safety education among students and parents. For instance, educators in schools in states with relatively higher rates of gun ownership and more permissive gun laws can be instrumental in implementing firearm safety education efforts. Also, school nurses can communicate with parents about effective gun safety and storage practices. As school mass shooting incidents
continued to rise, many schools implemented reactive strategies anticipating planned or unintentional gun violence incidents. Such strategies include the installation of metal detectors and cameras, searches on individuals and lockers, and arming teachers.

However, there is limited empirical support for these prevention strategies and their reliability even comes to question, as the strategies may also have adverse effects rather than a positive impact in reduction of firearm-related incident in schools. Education on firearm safety for students, promoting safe gun storage among parents, and specific policies that focus on reducing or eliminating the presence of firearms in schools can curb school shootings and promote a conducive learning environment.
Conclusion

School mass shootings, as a complex and multifaceted issue, have escalated and raised concerns for the public and policymakers regarding gun rights, control and violence, and zero-tolerance policies. Gun violence in schools results in fatalities and injuries that devastate children, educators, parents, and other members of the community. Besides causing physical harm, gun violence in schools has various ramifications, from legal to academic and social-emotional, and the substantial increase in school shootings raises concerns about students' well-being and mental health (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). Most schools implement various strategies to enhance safety and to ensure their staff can deter or subdue perpetrators quickly before law enforcement arrives. They include target-hardening security measures like arming staff with firearms, zero-tolerance policies, school resource officers (SROs), and other physical security measures.

However, research shows that these strategies have detrimental effects on students. For instance, the zero-tolerance policies to curtail gun-related violence in schools and other incidents of violence like bullying and threats have exacerbated the situation instead of effectively dealing with violence in schools. Also, research shows that preventing children and youths from gaining access to guns precedes detecting and deterring those who have access to firearms from carrying them to school and minimizing injuries and deaths during school shootings (Price & Khubchandani, 2019). It is considered the first and most effective, cost-beneficial level that can eliminate school gun violence as it hinders children and youths from accessing firearms. The guns used in most school shootings are legal and often taken from the house, highlighting the need to address gun ownership and control to stop school mass shootings.
While the US Constitution's second amendment includes gun rights, easing rules on firearm acquisition allows more gun purchases, which increases the possibility of more gun violence and legal issues. Moreover, many Americans, about 58%, favor stringent gun laws as a practical way to reduce gun violence, including safe storage of guns, strict background checks, and a ban on high-capacity magazines and assault weapons (PEW, 2023; Reeping et al., 2022). Research also indicates that school shootings and active school shootings occur at higher rates in states with more permissive firearm laws and higher gun ownership rates. Those with tighter policies and child prevention access laws have lower gun deaths and suicides among children and teenagers.

Therefore, effective reforms require concerted efforts from legislators and policymakers to prevent school mass shootings that have resulted in increased activism against gun violence by students and educators. All stakeholders affected by school mass shootings should participate in strict gun reforms that eliminate the presence of firearms in schools and promote a conducive learning environment. Also, school programs and policies should address the risk of gun violence by educating students and parents on firearm safety and storage.
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