

Federal Limits And The Future Of School Shooting Prevention In The United States
(*Had Persekutuan Dan Masa Depan Pencegahan Tembakan Sekolah Di Amerika Syarikat*)

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ABSTRACT

School shootings have become one of the most urgent youth safety challenges in the United States, yet federal action remains limited by constitutional, political, and structural barriers. This study examines why national-level reforms have produced only partial results despite widespread concern and decades of policy debate. Using a qualitative policy and legal analysis, it investigates three core areas: the constitutional constraints shaped by the Second Amendment, the division of federal and state authority under American federalism, and the fragmented enforcement of firearm regulations across states. These structural conditions create inconsistent levels of school safety and weaken federal initiatives such as the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and the Gun-Free School Zone Act. To identify possible pathways for stronger federal coordination, the paper analyzes the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 as an example of how federal incentives can influence state policy. Although this approach cannot be directly replicated for firearm regulation due to constitutional protections and political polarization, it provides important lessons on conditional funding, national agenda-setting, and the power of community and youth advocacy. The study concludes that meaningful progress requires improved federal-state collaboration, evidence-based prevention strategies, and sustained civic engagement from young people. Ultimately, reducing school shootings depends not only on legal reform but on a shared national commitment to protecting future generations.

Keywords: School Shooting Prevention, Gun Violence, Federalism, Second Amendment, Public Safety

ABSTRAK

Kejadian tembakan di sekolah kini merupakan antara cabaran keselamatan belia yang paling mendesak di Amerika Syarikat, namun tindakan kerajaan persekutuan masih terbatas oleh kekangan perlembagaan, politik, dan struktur pentadbiran. Kajian ini menganalisis sebab mengapa pembaharuan di peringkat nasional hanya menghasilkan impak yang terhad walaupun kebimbangan masyarakat semakin meningkat. Menggunakan pendekatan analisis dasar dan undang-undang secara kualitatif, kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada tiga aspek utama: kekangan Perlembagaan yang berpunca daripada Pindaan Kedua, pembahagian kuasa antara kerajaan persekutuan dan negeri dalam sistem federalisme Amerika, serta penguatkuasaan peraturan senjata api yang berpecah-pecah di seluruh negeri. Faktor-faktor struktur ini mewujudkan tahap keselamatan sekolah yang tidak konsisten dan menjejaskan inisiatif persekutuan seperti “Bipartisan Safer Communities Act” dan “Gun-Free School Zone Act.” Bagi menilai potensi penyelarasan persekutuan yang lebih kukuh, kajian ini membandingkan situasi tersebut dengan kejayaan “National Minimum Drinking Age Act 1984,” di mana insentif persekutuan berjaya mempengaruhi dasar negeri. Walaupun model ini tidak dapat digunakan secara langsung bagi isu senjata api kerana perlindungan hak berperlembagaan dan polarisasi politik, ia menawarkan panduan penting berkaitan penggunaan pembiayaan bersyarat, penetapan agenda nasional, dan peranan advokasi masyarakat. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa kemajuan bermakna memerlukan kerjasama persekutuan-negeri yang lebih baik, strategi pencegahan berasaskan bukti, dan penglibatan sivik belia yang berterusan. Akhirnya, usaha mengurangkan tembakan di sekolah bergantung bukan sahaja pada perubahan undang-undang tetapi juga komitmen nasional bersama untuk melindungi generasi akan datang.

Kata Kunci: Pencegahan Tembakan Sekolah; Keganasan Senjata Api; Federalisme; Pindaan Kedua; Keselamatan Awam

INTRODUCTION

School shootings represent one of the most urgent and persistent youth safety challenges in the United States. Over the past several decades, incidents of gun violence in educational settings have risen, repeatedly disrupting learning environments and undermining young people's sense of security (K-12 School Shooting Database, n.d.). While schools should be safe spaces where students learn, build friendships, and grow, many now experience lockdown drills, heightened anxiety, and ongoing concern about political inaction. As a result, school shootings have become not only a public health issue but also a critical matter of youth empowerment and civic engagement.

The roots of school shootings in the United States are complex and multilayered. They involve social conditions, mental health challenges, cultural attitudes toward firearms, and, importantly, the legal structures that regulate guns. The United States is one of the few countries in the world where the right to keep and bear arms is constitutionally protected. The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states, "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" (U.S. Const. amend. II). Unlike countries with centralized firearm governance, the United States' constitutional framework limits national authority over gun regulation and places primary responsibility on individual states.

This decentralized structure is reinforced by federalism. Under Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, Congress holds authority over matters such as national defence, foreign affairs, and interstate commerce, whereas states retain authority over education, public safety, and most gun policies (Adkins et al., 2023). As a result, firearm regulation varies significantly across states (Smart et al., 2024). Some adopt strict licensing requirements and background checks, whereas others permit open carry or allow firearm purchases with minimal restrictions. These disparities create uneven protection for students, meaning a child's safety depends heavily on the state in which they live.

Given these structural challenges, a key question arises: To what extent should school shootings be addressed at the federal level, and what kinds of legal barriers limit nationwide action? One way to approach this question is to examine past examples where the federal government has successfully influenced state-level policy to protect young people. For example, the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 used federal highway funds to encourage states to raise the legal drinking age to 21 in response to concerns

about drunk driving and motor vehicle fatalities among youth. Understanding how similar approaches can be applied to school safety offers a new insight into potential federal strategies. At the same time, past court cases and academic literature highlight how federal authority is frequently constrained, making it difficult to establish unified and consistent protections for students across state lines. Courts have stated that the federal government's authority to regulate firearms in school contexts is constitutionally limited, as demonstrated in *United States v. Lopez* (1995). There is a substantial body of relevant literature, as discussed in the following sections, but the most relevant research focuses on how constitutional structure and federalism constrain direct federal action on school shootings. However, existing scholarly literature does not cover the possibility of addressing school shootings at the federal level, especially through financial incentive-based mechanisms, such as the conditional spending approach used in the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984.

This paper examines the structural legal and policy barriers that limit school shooting prevention in the United States. It analyses constitutional constraints, federal-state level authority, and the limitations of past federal attempts. By exploring potential strategies to decrease incidents of school shootings, this analysis highlights how federal mechanisms could complement state autonomy while prioritizing youth safety.

Ultimately, understanding the legal barriers surrounding school shooting prevention is not only essential for policy development but is also central to the role young people can play as informed, engaged members of society. Although this analysis is focused on the United States, the question of how to protect students from violence is shared globally. For both the United States and the broader international community, supporting youth voices in civic processes is a critical step toward reducing violence, strengthening democratic values, and building safer educational environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in policy analysis and comparative legal analysis. Because school shootings involve structural, political, and legal factors rather than measurable experimental variables, a qualitative method allows for a more in-depth examination of how constitutional principles shape firearm regulation and youth safety. This methodology is appropriate for exploring why

national-level reforms have been limited and how existing legal structures constrain federal responses to school shootings.

Data and Sources

The study relies on publicly available secondary sources. Primary legal documents, including federal firearm statutes, state-level regulatory codes, and relevant U.S. Supreme Court decisions, provide the foundation for analyzing constitutional and institutional constraints. Particular attention is given to the Second Amendment, key federal statutes related to school safety and firearms, and legislation illustrating federal influence on state policy.

These legal sources are complemented by government reports from agencies such as the Department of Justice, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and congressional committees. Peer-reviewed academic research on gun violence, public policy, federalism, and school safety further informs the analysis.

Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds in several stages that correspond to the structure of the Results and Discussion section. First, the study examines the constitutional framework that governs firearm regulation in the United States. This includes analysis of the Second Amendment, the division of authority between federal and state governments, and the resulting fragmentation of firearm laws across states. This stage identifies the structural barriers that contribute to differing levels of protection for youth across states. Second, the study evaluates the effectiveness and limitations of current policy responses to school shootings. This includes federal initiatives, such as recent legislation addressing gun violence, as well as state-level measures. By reviewing these in the academic literature, the analysis explores why these measures have produced only partial or limited impacts on school shooting prevention.

Third, the study analyzes a domestic case where the federal government has used its authority to shape state policy in areas affecting youth, with a focus on the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984. This case is examined to understand the mechanisms through which federal pressure or coordination can influence state behavior. The insights are used to reflect on the potential and limitations of stronger federal involvement in school safety policy.

Limitations

It lacks cross-national comparisons as the focus is on the United States. Despite these limitations, the qualitative design provides a useful framework for understanding how legal and structural barriers shape school safety policy and how youth empowerment can contribute to addressing these challenges.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Structural Barriers to Federal Actions

Constitutional Constraints

To understand why federal action on school shooting prevention remains limited in the United States, it is essential to examine the structural barriers created by the Constitution. For decades, the amendment's wording has been central to debates over how far federal authority can extend in regulating firearms. The Second Amendment states, "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" (U.S. Const. amend. II). Although the interpretation has been controversial until recently, the U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted these provisions as protecting an individual's right to possess firearms for lawful purposes (NRA, n.d.).

This interpretation was firmly established in one of the landmark cases, *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008). Dick Heller, a licensed police officer, challenged the District of Columbia after being denied the right to keep a handgun at home for self-defence (*District of Columbia v. Heller*, 2008). At the time, the District had enacted strict firearm regulations that prohibited most handgun ownership and required legally owned guns in the home to remain unloaded and disassembled. The Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to possess a firearm unconnected to militia service, striking down the District's restriction (*District of Columbia v. Heller*, 2008). The interpretation was later extended to state and local governments in *McDonald v. City of Chicago* (2010), further limiting the federal regulatory authority available.

These decisions do not prohibit all gun regulations, but they significantly narrow the ability of federal and state lawmakers to legislate. This makes federal reforms more vulnerable to legal challenges. Even when Congress passes gun-related laws, opponents can argue that such policies infringe upon constitutionally protected rights. As a result,

the current interpretation of the Second Amendment forms a foundational structural barrier by limiting the federal government's ability to enact comprehensive nationwide policies.

Federalism and State Authority

Another barrier arises from the federalist system, in which public safety and education fall primarily under state regulatory authority rather than federal jurisdiction (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; Carlton et al., 2017). Under the Tenth Amendment, powers not explicitly granted to the federal government are reserved for the states, which includes most firearm regulations and school safety measures (U.S. Const. amend. X). This constitutional structure means that the United States lacks a unified national framework governing firearm ownership, licensing, or safety requirements.

This decentralized structure has produced significant variation in gun laws across the country. States such as California, New York, and Massachusetts maintain some of the strictest regulations, including comprehensive background checks, permit requirements, waiting periods, and bans on certain categories of firearms (Everytown Research & Policy, n.d.). In contrast, states such as Texas, Mississippi, and Arizona allow open carry without permits, have minimal licensing requirements, and impose fewer restrictions on firearm purchases (Everytown Research & Policy, n.d.). These differences are closely associated with partisan divisions, as individuals identifying with the Democratic Party are more likely to support stricter firearm regulations, whereas individuals identifying with the Republican Party are more likely to oppose additional regulatory controls (Schaeffer, 2024). This partisan divide reflects not only differing political cultures but also fundamentally different understandings of the role of government in regulating firearms across states.

Additionally, research confirms that this patchwork structure weakens the effectiveness of stricter states' regulations. Andrade et al. (2020) found that 178,712 interstate firearms were trafficked across state lines between 2015 and 2017, with major flows from states with loose regulations into stricter states: Arizona to California, Indiana to Illinois, and Nevada to California. This demonstrates that even strong state-level laws can be undermined when neighbouring states maintain permissive access to firearms. However, other studies also illustrate that despite these challenges, states with stronger gun laws tend to have lower firearm homicide and suicide rates (Brownlee, 2024). Sharkey

and Kang (2023) have also found that state regulations passed from 1991 to 2016, particularly background checks and waiting periods, were strongly associated with a substantial reduction in gun deaths.

For young people, this variation means that their level of protection from gun violence depends heavily on where they live. Students in strict-regulation states may benefit from stronger preventative measures, while those in more permissive states face higher risks due to easier access to firearms and fewer safety safeguards. Since school shootings can occur in any state, this fragmented system undermines the consistency of school safety nationwide.

The federal government has attempted to encourage a more unified approach at times, but these efforts often remain limited by legal and political challenges. As a result, federalism creates a structural barrier to uniform school safety policies, creating inequalities in how youth experience safety and risk.

Fragmented Firearm Laws and Enforcement Gaps

Fragmentation in firearm regulation extends far beyond differences between individual states. Even where laws exist, they are often incomplete, inconsistent, or applied unevenly. Unlike countries with centralized, strong firearm governance systems, such as Japan or the United Kingdom, the United States lacks uniform national standards for licensing, background checks, or safe firearm storage (Giffords Law Center, n.d.). As a result, the overall regulatory environment is patchwork in nature, creating enforcement gaps.

A central issue is the absence of a national firearm licensing or registration system. At the federal level, individuals may purchase a firearm from federally licensed dealers (FFLs) only after completing the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), as mandated by the Gun Control Act of 1968. Federal law also identifies nine categories of individuals prohibited from possessing firearms, including people convicted of serious crimes, fugitives, undocumented immigrants, domestic violence offenders, and those adjudicated as mentally unfit. Although these prohibitions appear comprehensive, research shows that they do not reliably prevent prohibited individuals from acquiring firearms (Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2024).

This gap arises because federal background check requirements apply only to purchases conducted through licensed dealers. Private sales are not subject to mandatory checks unless a state has passed its own universal background check laws (e.g., California, Colorado, New York).

Consequently, individuals who would fail a background check at an FFL can obtain firearms through unregulated private sales, a pathway described in the literature as a significant “background check loophole” (Daniels, 2013). This loophole weakens the impact of federal restrictions and allows guns to circulate easily across state borders.

Fragmentation also extends to firearm storage requirements. Some states have enacted Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws or other strict safe-storage mandates, while others impose no comparable obligations. CAP laws aim to prevent minors from accessing firearms by holding adults legally responsible for unsafe storage practices. According to the Giffords Law Center (n.d.), multiple studies have found that CAP laws correlate with meaningful reductions in unintentional firearm injuries, suicides, and overall fatalities among children and adolescents, with one study identifying a 13% reduction in firearm deaths among children aged 0–14. However, without consistent national standards, enforcement becomes uneven and firearms circulate across states. Combined with the interstate trafficking patterns identified in recent research, these enforcement gaps contribute to an unstable regulatory environment in which guns can move easily from permissive states into those with stricter restrictions.

Overall, the absence of national licensing, inconsistent background check requirements, and uneven enforcement create a fragmented regulatory environment. These structural weaknesses limit the ability of federal or state governments to implement coherent school shooting prevention strategies, leaving young people vulnerable regardless of their state’s individual policy efforts.

Limitations of Current Policy Approaches

Federal Policy Attempts and Their Limits

Despite growing public concern, federal-level action on gun violence, particularly school shootings, has remained limited in effectiveness. The most significant federal reform in recent decades has been the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) of 2022, passed in response to the Buffalo supermarket shooting and the Robb Elementary School shooting (Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, 2022). According to the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention (2024), the new act includes three key components: 1) solutions to reduce community violence and domestic violence; 2) solutions to address school and mass shootings; 3) funding to improve the mental health of our young

people.

BSCA broadened the category of gun sellers required to become licensed dealers. Among its key provisions, the BSCA expanded the category of gun sellers required to register as FFLs, enhanced background checks for buyers under age 21, and established federal criminal penalties for gun trafficking and state purchasing for the first time.

However, several major provisions rely on voluntary state participation rather than enforceable federal mandates. For example, certain school safety initiatives depend on states applying for and using federal funds. States that oppose stricter firearm regulation can therefore choose not to adopt many of the reforms encouraged by the Act. This reflects the constitutional and political constraints outlined in Section 1. Overall, while the BSCA marks the most significant federal gun legislation since 1994, its design reflects the narrow policy space available to Congress. The act remains an important step forward in reducing school shootings, but without national standards or enforceable mandates, its capacity to reduce school shootings is inherently constrained.

The Gun-Free School Zone Act (1990) and United States v. Lopez (1995)

The Gun-Free School Zone Act of 1990 (GFSZA) represents one of the earliest and clearest federal attempts to regulate firearms near K-12 schools. The law made it a federal offense to knowingly possess a firearm within 1,000 feet of a school zone (Gun-Free School Zone Act of 1990, 1990). The penalty for violating this law involves a fine of not more than 5,000 USD, imprisonment for up to 5 years, or both. However, only five years later, the U.S. Supreme Court significantly weakened this effort in *United States v. Lopez* (1995), ruling that Congress had exceeded its constitutional authority under the Commerce Clause, which grants Congress the power to regulate interstate commerce.

In this case, a high school student in Texas, Alfonso Lopez Jr., brought a concealed handgun to school and was charged under the GFSZA (*United States v. Lopez*, 1995). Lopez challenged the charge, arguing that simple gun possession near a school was not an economic activity and therefore fell outside federal regulatory power (*United States v. Lopez*, 1995). The Supreme Court agreed, stating that the law had no substantial connection to interstate commerce. This was the first time in over half a century that the Supreme Court struck down a federal statute for exceeding Congress’s commerce power. This ruling emphasized

that education and school safety fall primarily under state responsibility, and the federal government cannot regulate problems simply by linking them to national economic effects.

Although Congress later revised its Act to include a requirement that the firearm must have “moved in or otherwise affected interstate commerce,” the revised version still faces enforcement challenges and remains limited in effectiveness (Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1995). More importantly, the Lopez case revealed how difficult it is for Congress to establish federal jurisdiction even over matters that clearly involve youth safety. The case illustrates that structural constitutional limits often prevent the federal government from passing strong nationwide school-safety regulations. For the issue of school shootings, Lopez serves as a powerful example of how federal authority is constrained even when the risks to children are immediate.

Red Flag Law Inconsistency

Another major limitation of current gun policy is the uneven adoption and enforcement of Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), commonly known as red flag laws. These are civil court orders that temporarily remove or restrict firearm access for an individual who is behaving dangerously or represents a high risk of harm to self or others (The National ERPO Resource Center, n.d.). When a person is in crisis and considering harming themselves or others, family members or law enforcement can intervene by petitioning a court for an order to temporarily prevent someone from accessing guns (Everytown Research & Policy, n.d.). Although ERPOs are often highlighted as a tool for preventing both suicide and interpersonal violence, their effectiveness depends heavily on whether states choose to adopt and implement them.

As of 2025, only 22 states have adopted this policy, and the scope of these laws varies significantly across jurisdictions (Everytown Research & Policy, n.d.). For example, California allows law enforcement, immediate family members, employers, coworkers, teachers, roommates, people with a child in common, or those who have a dating relationship to petition for an order, while states like Florida, Indiana, New Mexico, and Rhode Island only allow law enforcement (Everytown Research & Policy, n.d.). In states without red flag laws, individuals who display warning signs, including threats toward schools, violent social media posts, or signs of suicidal behavior, may legally retain access to firearms, even when family members or police have serious concerns. A study by Lankford et al. (2019) finds that the attackers of 15 deadliest mass

shootings in the United States from 1998 to 2018 hinted at violence before committing the acts. This reveals that the ERPOs can be a factor for prevention when enacted and implemented correctly.

However, red flag laws are not federally mandated, and their absence in many states creates substantial gaps in the national prevention aspect. Even in states that have adopted ERPOs, enforcement remains uneven. This inconsistency shows the repeated pattern seen throughout American gun policy: states with strong prevention frameworks may reduce risk locally, but these protections do not extend across state borders. As a result, school safety depends on their geographic location and the political will of state governments.

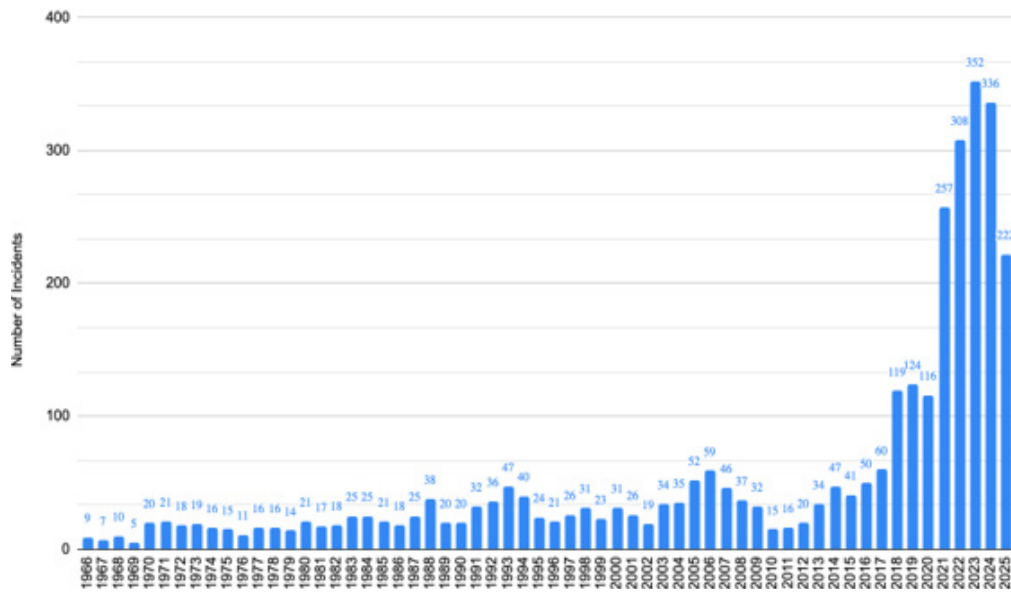
Limits of School-Based Security Measures

Despite increasing investment in school security over the past two decades, research shows that many school-based safety strategies do not meaningfully reduce the likelihood of school shootings. School-based security measures include metal detectors, surveillance systems, active shooter drills, and proposals to arm teachers. While such strategies may help schools respond to emergencies, they do not address the root causes of school shootings.

Reeping et al. (2021) note that many frequently adopted security measures fail to prevent shootings and may unintentionally heighten anxiety among students and teachers. For example, metal detectors and visible security personnel may contribute to a sense of constant threat. Although some school-based approaches, such as behavioural threat assessments and evidence-based crisis response plans, may help identify risks earlier, these strategies remain limited in their ability to stop shootings before they occur.

These limitations become even more evident when looking at long-term national data. Figure 1 illustrates the number of school shooting incidents on K-12 property between 1966 and 2025, drawn from the K-12 School Shooting Database (n.d.). The data reveals a significant rise in incidents over the past decade, with sharp increases beginning around 2018 and record highs in 2023 (352 incidents) and 2024 (336 incidents). This escalation has occurred despite widespread adoption of school security technologies and preparedness procedures. The continuing rise in school shooting incidents demonstrates that school-based security strategies alone are insufficient. Without stronger, more coordinated policy interventions, particularly at the federal level, schools are left to manage the consequences of systemic failures in gun regulations.

K-12 School Shooting Database: Incidents by Year 1966-2025



Source: K-12 School Shooting Database. 2025 data incomplete

FIGURE 1. Number of K-12 School Shootings From 1966-2025

Federal Coordination Lessons from the Drinking Age Act

Background and Mechanisms of the Act

The National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 provides one example of how the federal government can influence state-level public safety policies without directly mandating them. Before the Act, states set their own drinking age, most ranging between 18 and 21 (Toomey et al., 1996). The inconsistency contributed to high rates of alcohol-related car crashes among young people, particularly when teenagers crossed state borders to purchase alcohol in states with lower age requirements. This issue caught public attention after highly publicized crashes in which youth below the legal drinking age would drive to an adjoining state with a lower minimum legal drinking age to drink legally and crash on their way home (Federal Trade Commission, n.d.).

To address this national public safety concern, Congress passed the Drinking Age Act, which did not directly require states to raise the drinking age. Instead, it used conditional funding: states that refused to set the minimum age to 21 would lose 10% of their federal highway funds (National Minimum Drinking Age Act, 1984). This financial incentive was highly effective, and all states raised their drinking age to 21 by 1988

(Toomey et al., 1996). According to the Federal Trade Commission (n.d.), since Congress passed the Act in 1984, drinking by high school seniors has fallen substantially—from 66% to 42%.

Why Federal Pressure Worked in the Drinking Age Act

The National Minimum Drinking Age Act was successful for several reasons. First, drunk-driving deaths among teenagers presented a clear and widely recognized national crisis. Research by Wagenaar and Toomey (2002) shows that fatal traffic crashes among youth increased following the lowering of the legal age. The evidence strengthened federal justification for intervention and made the policy politically acceptable.

Second, the federal government relied on conditional spending, rather than direct regulation of behavior. As mentioned earlier, states that refuse to raise their drinking age to 21 would lose 10% of their federal highway funding (National Minimum Drinking Age Act, 1984). The Supreme Court later upheld this approach in *South Dakota v. Dole* (1987), ruling that Congress may attach conditions to federal funds as long as those conditions promote the general welfare and are “unambiguously” stated. Since the Act did not directly force states to change their drinking laws, it fits within the constitutional boundaries of federal power.

The third point is the involvement of youth

advocacy and civic engagement. Parent- and student-led advocacy played a crucial role in legal drinking age reforms. Organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) mobilized families, schools, and communities, raising national awareness and pressuring policymakers to adopt stricter safety standards (El-Guebaly, 2005; SADD, n.d.). These movements reshaped public safety policies.

Fourth, financial incentives were an effective way to make the National Minimum Drinking Age Act influential in the United States. While it was theoretically possible for the federal government to directly require states to adopt a uniform drinking age, doing so could have raised constitutional concerns. By relying on financial incentives, the federal government was able to avoid potential constitutional issues that direct restrictions on the drinking age might have created. This approach demonstrates one way in which a federal standard can function effectively within the U.S. federal system

Fifth and most importantly, alcohol regulation does not involve an explicit constitutional right. Unlike gun ownership, which is protected under the Second Amendment, drinking age policies did not trigger constitutional debates about individuals' rights and liberties. The federal government, therefore, faced fewer legal constraints in shaping policy.

Together, these factors made it possible for the federal government to guide states to adopt the same standard. The Act demonstrates how national coordination can be achieved when federal incentives align with clear public safety concerns and do not conflict with constitutional limitations.

Why Replicating This Model for Gun Violence is Difficult

While the National Minimum Drinking Age Act illustrates how federal coordination can successfully improve youth safety, applying this model for school shootings is far more complex. The key difference is constitutional: unlike alcohol regulation, firearm ownership is protected under the Second Amendment. Current Supreme Court decisions such as *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) and *McDonald v. Chicago* (2010) affirm that gun ownership is an individual right. Since gun ownership is treated as an individual right rather than a matter of ordinary public policy concern, federal attempts to impose national standards face a much higher legal barrier than they did in the case of drinking age reforms.

Political divisions make nationwide

coordination even more difficult. Whereas the drinking age reform received broad bipartisan support, gun regulation remains one of the most polarizing issues in the United States. According to Sola and Pickett (2024), while 88% Democrats and 66% of independents support stricter gun laws, only 26% of Republicans do so. Powerful advocacy groups, such as the National Rifle Association and the National Shooting Sports Foundation, also strongly resist federal conditions tied to firearm policy. As a result, proposals to use federal funding incentives to encourage stronger gun regulations face significant political pushback.

Additionally, federal authority over public safety and education is limited. As seen in *United States v. Lopez* (1995), school safety is considered a state responsibility, and Congress cannot simply extend its authority. Because of this, even well-designed federal incentives may fail to override states' preference for maintaining control over their own firearm laws. Taken together, the constitutional protections of gun rights, high levels of political polarization, and the structural role of states in regulating public safety create significant barriers to applying the Drinking Age Act model to school shooting prevention. These constraints explain why federal efforts remain fragmented and why school safety continues to vary from state to state.

Key Lessons for School Shooting Prevention

Although the Drinking Age Act cannot be perfectly replicated, it still provides several practical lessons that can guide future policy efforts to reduce school shootings. First, the Act demonstrates that federal leadership can play an important agenda-setting role. When Congress highlights a youth safety crisis as a national concern, it can influence public attention and encourage states to prioritize prevention even if the federal government cannot impose uniform firearm regulation. The Act also showed how conditional funding can be used to strengthen prevention systems without direct regulation. While Congress cannot mandate gun policies due to constitutional limits, it can incentivize states to adopt measures related to school safety, background checks, and more.

Finally, the Act illustrated how youth advocacy and civic engagement can accelerate change. As mentioned earlier, organizations such as MADD and SADD played important roles in regulating drinking age at the federal level. These movements illustrate how youth and community activism can reshape public safety policies. In the context of school shootings, a student-led organization that raises awareness and the need for gun control reform, March for Our Lives

has already shown the power of student voices in shaping public conversations (March For Our Lives, n.d.). A coordinated national effort that elevates youth perspectives could strengthen political will across states and support more consistent safety standards.

These lessons suggest that while the federal government cannot duplicate the Drinking Age Act model for firearm regulation, it can still promote national coordination and invest in prevention strategies that enhance school safety.

CONCLUSION

School shootings remain one of the most persistent and devastating threats to youth in the United States. This paper has shown that the federal government faces significant structural and constitutional barriers in addressing this issue. The current interpretation of the Second Amendment, the federalist division of power, and the highly fragmented nature of firearm regulations across states collectively restrict the ability of Congress to implement unified national policies. As a result, federal responses, such as the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act or the Gun-Free School Zone Act, have produced only partial or inconsistent results, leaving states with wide discretion in how they choose to regulate firearms and enhance school safety.

The case of the National Minimum Drinking Age Act offers valuable insight into how the federal government can guide state policy without infringing on constitutional boundaries. Although this model cannot be fully applied to gun regulation and school shooting prevention, it provides important lessons about conditional funding and the power of nationwide public engagement.

Effective change in the 1980s was made possible not only through federal incentives but also through strong advocacy from parents, students, and communities. This demonstrates that public pressure and civic participation can shift political priorities.

Looking ahead, the federal government, states, and communities will need to work together to develop more consistent approaches to prevention. This includes expanding evidence-based strategies, improving background check systems, investing in mental health and early intervention, and strengthening interstate coordination. For long-term progress, policymakers must recognize that fragmented state-by-state policies cannot address a problem that crosses borders.

Ultimately, reducing school shootings is not only a matter of legal reform but also a matter of civic responsibility. As youth continue to engage with this

issue, they hold significant power to reshape national priorities. Schools should be places where students learn and grow, not places where they fear being shot or losing friends. The future of school safety depends on a willingness to prioritize the well-being of youth over partisan divides. This paper suggests that while structural barriers are real, coordinated leadership and empowered youth communities can drive meaningful change. The United States already has the knowledge, tools, and growing youth leadership needed to strengthen school safety. What is still required is a shared national commitment—an honest, united effort to build a safer future for the next generation.

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