

United States v. Lopez (1995)

Facts of the Case:

In the Gun Free School Zones Act of 1990, Congress made it a federal offense "for any individual knowingly to possess a firearm at a place that the individual knows, or has reasonable cause to believe, is a school zone."

On March 10, 1992, respondent, who was then a 12th grade student, arrived at Edison High School in San Antonio, Texas, carrying a concealed .38 caliber handgun and five bullets. Acting upon an anonymous tip, school authorities confronted respondent, who admitted that he was carrying the weapon. He was arrested and charged under Texas law with firearm possession on school premises. The next day, the state charges were dismissed after federal agents charged respondent by complaint with violating the Gun Free School Zones Act of 1990.

On appeal, respondent challenged his conviction based on his claim that [The Gun Free School Zones Act] exceeded Congress' power to legislate under the Commerce Clause.

Majority Opinion (edited excerpt)

Chief Justice Rehnquist delivered the opinion of the Court.

We start with first principles. The Constitution creates a Federal Government of enumerated powers. See U. S. Const., Art. I, §8. As James Madison wrote, "[t]he powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite." The Federalist No. 45, pp. 292-293 (C. Rossiter ed. 1961). This constitutionally mandated division of authority "was adopted by the Framers to ensure protection of our fundamental liberties." *Gregory v. Ashcroft*, [501 U.S. 452](#), 458 (1991) (internal quotation marks omitted). "Just as the separation and independence of the coordinate branches of the Federal Government serves to prevent the accumulation of excessive power in any one branch, a healthy balance of power between the States and the Federal Government will reduce the risk of tyranny and abuse from either front." *Ibid.*

In *Jones & Laughlin Steel*, the Court warned that the scope of the interstate commerce power "must be considered in the light of our dual system of government and may not be extended so as to embrace effects upon interstate commerce so indirect and remote that to embrace them, in view of our complex society, would effectually obliterate the distinction between what is national and what is local and create a completely centralized government." 301 U. S., at 37; see also *Darby, supra*, at 119-120

[The Gun Free School Zone Act] is a criminal statute that by its terms has nothing to do with "commerce" or any sort of economic enterprise, however broadly one might define those terms. ^[n.3] [The Gun Free School Zone Act] is not an essential part of a larger

regulation of economic activity, in which the regulatory scheme could be undercut unless the intrastate activity were regulated. It cannot, therefore, be sustained under our cases upholding regulations of activities that arise out of or are connected with a commercial transaction, which viewed in the aggregate, substantially affects interstate commerce. [This is the standard for determining whether or not an activity falls within the commerce clause].

We pause to consider the implications of the Government's arguments. The Government admits, under its "costs of crime" reasoning, that Congress could regulate not only all violent crime, but all activities that might lead to violent crime, regardless of how tenuously they relate to interstate commerce. See Tr. of Oral Arg. 8-9. Similarly, under the Government's "national productivity" reasoning, Congress could regulate any activity that it found was related to the economic productivity of individual citizens: family law (including marriage, divorce, and child custody), for example. Under the theories that the Government presents in support of [The Gun Free School Zones Act], it is difficult to perceive any limitation on federal power, even in areas such as criminal law enforcement or education where States historically have been sovereign. Thus, if we were to accept the Government's arguments, we are hard pressed to posit any activity by an individual that Congress is without power to regulate.

To uphold the Government's contentions here, we would have to pile inference upon inference in a manner that would bid fair to convert congressional authority under the Commerce Clause to a general police power of the sort retained by the States. Admittedly, some of our prior cases have taken long steps down that road, giving great deference to congressional action. The broad language in these opinions has suggested the possibility of additional expansion, but we decline here to proceed any further. To do so would require us to conclude that the Constitution's enumeration of powers does not presuppose something not enumerated, cf. *Gibbons v. Ogden*, *supra*, at 195, and that there never will be a distinction between what is truly national and what is truly local, cf. *Jones & Laughlin Steel*, *supra*, at 30. This we are unwilling to do.

For the foregoing reasons the judgment of the Court of Appeals is *Affirmed*.

Dissenting Opinion (edited excerpt)

Justice Breyer, with whom Justice Stevens, Justice Souter, and Justice Ginsburg join, dissenting.

The issue in this case is whether the Commerce Clause authorizes Congress to enact a statute that makes it a crime to possess a gun in, or near, a school. In my view, the statute falls well within the scope of the commerce power as this Court has understood that power over the last half century.

For one thing, reports, hearings, and other readily available literature make clear that the problem of guns in and around schools is widespread and extremely serious. These materials report, for example, that four percent of American high school students (and six percent of inner city high school students) carry a gun to school at least occasionally, Centers for Disease Control 2342; Sheley, McGee, & Wright 679; that 12 percent of urban high school students have had guns fired at them, *ibid.*; that 20 percent of those students have been threatened with guns, *ibid.*; and that, in any 6 month period, several hundred thousand schoolchildren are victims of violent crimes in or near their schools, U. S. Dept. of Justice 1 (1989); House Select Committee Hearing 15 (1989). And, they report that this widespread violence in schools throughout the Nation significantly interferes with the quality of education in those schools. See, *e.g.*, House Judiciary Committee Hearing 44 (1990) (linking school violence to dropout rate); U. S. Dept. of Health 118-119 (1978) (school violence victims suffer academically); compare U. S. Dept. of Justice 1 (1991) (gun violence worst in inner city schools), with National Center 47 (dropout rates highest in inner cities). Based on reports such as these, Congress obviously could have thought that guns and learning are mutually exclusive. Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee Hearing 39 (1993); U. S. Dept. of Health 118, 123-124 (1978). And, Congress could therefore have found a substantial educational problem--teachers unable to teach, students unable to learn--and concluded that guns near schools contribute substantially to the size and scope of that problem.

Having found that guns in schools significantly undermine the quality of education in our Nation's classrooms, Congress could also have found, given the effect of education upon interstate and foreign commerce, that gun related violence in and around schools is a commercial, as well as a human, problem. Education, although far more than a matter of economics, has long been inextricably intertwined with the Nation's economy.

Increasing global competition also has made primary and secondary education economically more important. The portion of the American economy attributable to international trade nearly tripled between 1950 and 1980, and more than 70 percent of American made goods now compete with imports. Marshall 205; Marshall & Tucker 33. Yet, lagging worker productivity has contributed to negative trade balances and to real hourly compensation that has fallen below wages in 10 other industrialized nations. See National Center 57; Handbook of Labor Statistics 561, 576 (1989); Neef & Kask 28, 31. At least some significant part of this serious productivity problem is attributable to students who emerge from classrooms without the reading or mathematical skills necessary to compete with their European or Asian counterparts. Finally, there is evidence that, today more than ever, many firms base their location decisions upon the presence, or absence, of a work force with a basic education. See MacCormack, Newman, & Rosenfield 73; Coffee 296. Scholars on the subject report, for example, that today, "[h]igh speed communication and transportation make it possible to produce most products and services anywhere in the world," National Center 38; that "[m]odern machinery and production methods can therefore be combined with low wage workers to drive costs down," *ibid.*; that managers can perform " `back office functions anywhere in the world now,' " and say that if they " `can't get enough skilled workers here' " they will " `move the skilled jobs out of the country,' " *id.*, at 41; with the consequence that "rich

countries need better education and retraining, to reduce the supply of unskilled workers and to equip them with the skills they require for tomorrow's jobs," Survey of Global Economy 37. In light of this increased importance of education to individual firms, it is no surprise that half of the Nation's manufacturers have become involved with setting standards and shaping curricula for local schools, Maturi 65-68, that 88 percent think this kind of involvement is important, *id.*, at 68, that more than 20 States have recently passed educational reforms to attract new business, Overman 61-62, and that business magazines have begun to rank cities according to the quality of their schools, see Boyle 24.

Businesses are less likely to locate in communities where violence plagues the classroom. Families will hesitate to move to neighborhoods where students carry guns instead of books. (Congress expressly found in 1994 that "parents may decline to send their children to school" in certain areas "due to concern about violent crime and gun violence." 18 U. S. C. A. §922(q)(1)(E) (Nov. 1994 Supp.)). And (to look at the matter in the most narrowly commercial manner), interstate publishers therefore will sell fewer books and other firms will sell fewer school supplies where the threat of violence disrupts learning. Most importantly, like the local racial discrimination at issue in *McClung* and *Daniel*, the local instances here, taken together and considered as a whole, create a problem that causes serious human and social harm, but also has nationally significant economic dimensions.

Upholding this legislation would do no more than simply recognize that Congress had a "rational basis" for finding a significant connection between guns in or near schools and (through their effect on education) the interstate and foreign commerce they threaten. For these reasons, I would reverse the judgment of the Court of Appeals. Respectfully, I dissent.