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Another School Shooting.... We shouldn't be surprised

A Message From the President of Americans Against Gun Violence
May 20, 2018

"...And please don't leave it to high school students to be the only ones to call for the kinds of definitive gun control laws that will protect them – and the rest of us – from the regular occurrence of horrific mass shootings."

Dear Friends,

Our country is once again reeling from yet another mass shooting on a U.S. school campus. At about 7:30 AM Central Daylight Time on Friday, May 18, a 17 year old student at Santa Fe High School, located in a town of about 12,000 people 20 miles west of Galveston, Texas, opened fire with a shotgun and a handgun, killing eight students and two teachers and wounding 13 others.¹ We should be horrified; we should be saddened; and we should be outraged by this latest mass shooting on a U.S. school campus - but we shouldn't be surprised, for we, as a society, have taken no definitive action to stop school shootings - not since the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018; not since the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012; not since the Columbine High School mass shooting in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999; and not since the first mass school shooting in modern U.S. history on August 1, 1966, at the University of Texas in Austin or the scores of other horrific school mass shootings that have occurred over the past half century.

The Santa Fe High School mass shooting is reported to be the 22nd shooting on a U.S. school campus this year.² It's the worst mass shooting since the February 14 Marjory Stoneman Douglas massacre in which 19 year old Nikolas Cruz killed 17 people, including 14 students, and wounded 17 others. Santa Fe High School, like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, was considered to be a safe environment for students. Like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Santa Fe High prepared students and staff for an active shooter incident with regular lockdown drills, and like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, there were armed police officers present at the time the shooting occurred.³

Unlike Nikolas Cruz, the alleged shooter at Santa Fe High School, Dimitrios Pagourtzis, did not use an AR-15 style assault rifle. According to initial reports, in addition to a handgun, he used a pump action shotgun,⁴ which can be fired almost

as rapidly as a semi-automatic one. Initial reports also indicate that unlike Cruz, Pagortzis didn't exhibit any "red flags" prior to the mass shooting that could have tipped off authorities to the fact that he was planning the attack. Like Cruz and most other school shooters,⁵ though, he reportedly brought the weapons used in the attack from home.⁶

In the wake of the Parkland, Florida mass shooting in February, high school students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas and other schools around the country launched an unprecedented wave of activism, including organizing school walkouts and the largest protest march ever held in Washington DC. To date, though, this activism has led to no new federal gun control legislation and to only limited changes in state laws. The Florida State Legislature, for example, passed a bill to raise the age at which someone can buy an assault rifle from 18 to 21.⁷ The same bill, however, also includes a provision that would allow teachers with a modicum of training to carry handguns in school.⁸

In an effort to encourage high school gun control activists to be bold and specific in their asks of elected leaders, I posted an "[Open Letter to High School Gun Control Activists](#)" on the [Americans Against Gun Violence website](#) on the eve of the one month anniversary of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas mass shooting. To foster and reward critical thinking on the gun control issue, we also opened a national high school essay contest on March 29 with \$15,000 in total awards. The prompt for our national high school essay contest was the last sentence (highlighted in bold) from the following statement made by the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut on the floor of the U.S. Senate on June 11, 1968:

Pious condolences will no longer suffice....Quarter measures and half measures will no longer suffice....**The time has now come that we must adopt stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world.**⁹

The United States is the only high income democratic country in the world in which mass shootings, including shootings on school campuses, occur on a regular basis.¹⁰ The overall gun homicide rate in the United States is 25 times higher than the average rate in other high income democratic countries.¹¹ The gun homicide rate for U.S. high school aged youth is 82 times higher.¹² The reasons for the extraordinarily high rate of gun violence in the United States are not higher rates of mental illness or substance abuse,¹³ not a higher level of socioeconomic disparity,¹⁴ and not a more violent society in general.¹⁵ The reasons for our extraordinarily high rate of gun violence are our extraordinarily lax gun control laws as compared with all other high income democratic countries, the associated extraordinarily high number of guns in circulation in our country,¹⁶ and what Senator Dodd called "the ridiculous ease" with which almost anyone in our country can acquire almost any kind of a gun.¹⁷

Other high income democratic countries have reacted swiftly and definitively to mass shootings. Following a mass shooting in the resort town of Port Arthur in 1996 committed with assault rifles, the Australian government took just 13 days to agree to ban civilian ownership not only of all automatic and semi-automatic rifles, but also of all pump-action shotguns.¹⁸ The legislation also included strict regulations concerning storage of guns. Following a mass shooting at the

Dunblane Elementary School in Scotland committed with handguns in 1996, Great Britain, which already had stringent regulations on civilian ownership of handguns, passed legislation within two years to ban handguns completely.¹⁹ As noted above, despite scores of horrific mass shootings on U.S. school campuses over the past half century, the U.S. federal government has failed to take any definitive action to prevent these massacres from recurring on a regular basis.

The deadline for students to enter our Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest was May 6. Ironically, May 18, the day of the Santa Fe High School mass shooting, was the next to last day for essay readers to turn in their ratings in the first phase of selecting the 12 contest winners. We received many outstanding essays from high school students around the country, including survivors of school shootings. The passion that the current generation of high school students has displayed for taking definitive action to stop the epidemic of gun violence in our country comes through loud and clear in most of the essays. On the other hand, a number of the students make the point that it shouldn't be their responsibility to ensure that the United States adopts stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws that have long been in place in all other high income democratic countries. It should have been the responsibility of the generation of adults who were alive when Senator Thomas Dodd first made his statement on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1968 and all the generations of adults who have followed. And while many students write that when they reach voting age, they will vote **against** politicians who take money from the NRA, they will find it difficult, if not impossible, to find politicians to vote **for** who have the political courage to support the kind of stringent gun control laws that Senator Dodd called for 50 years ago – the kind of laws that would, without a doubt, stop the regular occurrence of school shootings in our country and reduce overall rates of gun violence to levels comparable to those in other high income democracies.

[Please reply to this message](#) if you're not already signed up as an essay reader in our Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest and if you'd like to participate in the final phases of choosing the this year's winners. Please also consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the essay contest fund via the [Join/Donate page](#) of the Americans Against Gun Violence website to help ensure that we'll be able to continue to offer and expand the contest in future years.

And please don't leave it to high school students to be the only ones to call for the kinds of definitive gun control laws that will protect them – and the rest of us – from the regular occurrence of horrific mass shootings. Please [contact your elected officials](#) and other candidates for office who are seeking your vote in the upcoming election cycle and let them know that it's not nearly enough for them to merely refuse to take money from the gun lobby – that you expect them to openly advocate and do everything within their power to enact stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws in all other high income democratic countries.

I look forward to sharing the essays of the winners of our National High School Essay Contest with you on June 4. And when I send the student winners their award checks, I look forward to also telling them that they are not alone, and that we at Americans Against Gun Violence are doing everything within our power to

get our country to adopt definitive gun control laws that will protect them from the threat of wanton gun violence. Thanks for doing your part in this effort.

Sincerely,



Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a board certified emergency physician, a former expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps, and a combat veteran decorated for "courage and composure under fire" during the Vietnam War.

¹ Manny Fernandez, Alan Blinder, and Niraj Chokshi, "10 Dead in Santa Fe, Texas, School Shooting; Suspect Used Shotgun and Revolver," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/us/school-shooting-santa-fe-texas.html>; Amir Vera, "These Are the Victims of the Santa Fe High School Shooting - CNN," CNN, May 19, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/18/us/texas-school-shooting-victims/index.html>.

² Jason Hanna, Dakin Andone, and Keith Allen, "10 Killed, Suspect Identified in Texas High School Shooting, Officials Say," CNN, May 18, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/18/us/texas-school-shooting/index.html>.

³ Manny Fernandez, Richard Fausset, and Jess Bidgood, "Texas School Shooting: 10 Dead, 10 Hurt, and Many Not Surprised It Happened," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/us/school-shooting-santa-fe-texas.html>.

⁴ Fernandez, Fausset, and Bidgood.

⁵ Tawnell D. Hobbs, "Most Guns Used in School Shootings Come From Home," *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2018, sec. US, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-school-shootings-most-guns-come-from-home-1522920600>.

⁶ Hanna, Andone, and Allen, "10 Killed, Suspect Identified in Texas High School Shooting, Officials Say."

⁷ John Schuppe, "Florida Governor Signs 'school Safety' Bill That Could Arm Teachers," NBC News, March 9, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/florida-governor-signs-school-safety-bill-could-arm-teachers-n855311>.

⁸ Phil Helsel, "Florida Legislature Sends Gun and School Safety Bill to Governor," NBC News, March 7, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/florida-legislature-sends-gun-school-safety-bill-governor-n854701>.

⁹ Thomas Dodd, "Text of Speech by Senator Thomas Dodd on Floor of U.S. Senate: The Sickness of Violence and the Need for Gun Control Legislation" (Office of Senator Thomas Dodd, June 11, 1968), http://thedoddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/research/gun_control.htm#; Thomas Dodd, "Press Release: Pious Condolences Will No Longer Suffice" (Office of Senator Thomas Dodd, June 10, 1968), http://thedoddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/research/gun_control.htm#.

¹⁰ Jen Christensen, "Why the US Has the Most Mass Shootings," CNN, November 28, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/27/health/u-s-most-mass-shootings/index.html>; Max Fisher and Josh

Keller, "What Explains U.S. Mass Shootings? International Comparisons Suggest an Answer," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2017, sec. Americas, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/world/americas/mass-shootings-us-international.html>.

¹¹ Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, "Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-Income OECD Countries, 2010," *The American Journal of Medicine* 129, no. 3 (March 1, 2016): 266–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2015.10.025>.

¹² Ashish P. Thakrar et al., "Child Mortality In The US And 19 OECD Comparator Nations: A 50-Year Time-Trend Analysis," *Health Affairs* 37, no. 1 (January 2018): 140–49, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0767>.

¹³ L. Andrade et al., "Cross-National Comparisons of the Prevalences and Correlates of Mental Disorders.," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 78 (2000): 413–425.

¹⁴ "OECD Income Distribution Database (IDD): Gini, Poverty, Income, Methods and Concepts," OECD, accessed November 29, 2017, [//www.compareyourcountry.org/inequality?lg=en](http://www.compareyourcountry.org/inequality?lg=en).

¹⁵ "Assault Rate in OECD Countries: 2013 or Latest Year Available, % of Adults Assaulted in the Past 12 Months," OECD, accessed September 18, 2016, <https://figure.nz/chart/yd9BelUz6xKnvNpW>.

¹⁶ Christensen, "Why the US Has the Most Mass Shootings"; "Guns in the United States — Firearms, Gun Law and Gun Control," GunPolicy.org, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/united-states>.

¹⁷ Dodd, "Quarter Measures and Half Measures Will No Longer Suffice"; Dodd, "Pious Condolences Will No Longer Suffice."

¹⁸ Rebecca Peters, "Rational Firearm Regulation: Evidence-Based Gun Laws in Australia," in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 195–204.

¹⁹ Michael J. North, "Gun Control in Great Britain after the Dunblane Shootings," in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 185–93.