



Americans Against Gun Violence
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An Open Letter to Student Gun Control Activists

Dear Student Activists,

I'm writing to you on behalf of Americans Against Gun Violence to express our full support for your demands for definitive action to prevent future tragedies like the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14. Your outrage is reasonable and appropriate, and we applaud you for your activism.

Like most Americans, we were horrified as the news unfolded on February 14 about yet another mass shooting on a U.S. school campus – but we weren't surprised. Despite repeated mass shootings on school campuses over the past five decades, our country has failed to take the obvious steps necessary to prevent such tragedies from recurring on a regular basis.

What has surprised and inspired us following the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School is the number of you who have stepped forward to demand that definitive gun control laws be enacted, and the passion and eloquence with which you've expressed your demands. We look forward to working with you toward our shared goal of stopping the epidemic of gun violence in our country. You've earned the attention of the American public and our elected officials. We'd like to offer you some suggestions, based on our own experience, concerning how you might use your platform to best advantage.

Be specific in your “ask”. Tell elected officials, school teachers and administrators, and the American electorate exactly what you expect them to do. At Americans Against Gun Violence, our “ask” of elected officials is that they openly advocate and do everything within their power to enact stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in every other high income democratic country of the world - countries in which mass shootings, including shootings on school campuses, are rare or non-existent, and in which, on average, high school aged youth are murdered by guns at a rate that is 82 times lower than in the United States.¹

Challenge conventional notions of “politically correctness.” There are many politicians and leaders of other “gun violence prevention” (GVP) organizations who refrain from even suggesting that we reduce the pool of guns already in private hands in our country - estimated to about 350 million² - for fear of being labelled “gun grabbers;” and who believe that it's no longer “PC” to even use the term “gun control.” Instead, they advocate “sensible gun regulations” and “keeping guns out of the wrong hands.” Ask these politicians and other GVP advocates

how they propose to keep guns out of the wrong hands in a country that has more guns than people; and why it's "sensible" to do anything short of adopting the same kinds of stringent gun control regulations in the United States that have been proved to be effective in reducing rates of gun violence in other high income democratic countries to levels that are a tiny fraction of the rates in our own country.³

Don't limit yourselves to calling for bans of "AR-15's" or "assault rifles."

Granted, there is no legitimate civilian use for such weapons, which are specifically designed to kill and maim large numbers of people in a short period of time. But there's no universally accepted definition of an "assault rifle," and any gun that can accept a readily exchangeable magazine and that can be fired in automatic or semi-automatic mode can be used to inflict large numbers of casualties in a short period of time. Rather than calling for bans of "assault rifles," call for a ban on all automatic and semi-automatic rifles comparable to the ban that the government of Australia agreed to enact within just 13 days of the 1996 Port Arthur massacre.⁴ Since the ban was enacted, there have been no further mass shootings in Australia, and the rate of gun homicide in Australia has dropped from one fifteenth the US rate to one twenty-seventh the US rate.⁵

Don't ignore handguns. Historically, most mass shootings in the United States have been committed with handguns,⁶ which are also used in the vast majority of the more than 100 gun deaths that occur on a daily basis in our country.⁷ At the time that Australia adopted its ban on semi-automatic rifles in 1996, it already had stringent regulations on civilian ownership of handguns.⁸ Great Britain also had stringent handgun laws in 1996, but a legal handgun owner nevertheless used a semi-automatic pistol to shoot and kill 16 young children and a teacher and wound 13 others at Dunblane Primary School in Scotland.⁹ Great Britain responded by banning all civilian handgun ownership. The rate of gun related deaths in Great Britain is now fifty times lower than in the United States.¹⁰ When you call for the adoption of gun control laws comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries, specify that you not only want bans on automatic and semi-automatic rifles, but that you also want also stringent restrictions on civilian handgun ownership, like the ones in Australia, or even better, a complete ban on handguns like the one in Great Britain.

Don't be intimidated by false patriots who claim to "support the Second Amendment." Instead, ask these individuals which version of the Second Amendment they support – the original version, which begins with the phrase, "A well regulated militia," or the NRA rewrite, which effectively deletes this phrase from the U.S. Constitution.¹¹ The late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger called the misrepresentation of the Second Amendment by the gun lobby as guaranteeing an individual right to own guns "one of the greatest pieces of fraud" on the American public by special interest groups that he had ever seen in his lifetime."¹² Sadly, a narrow 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court became a party to this fraud in the 2008 *Heller* decision, which overturned Washington DC's partial ban on handgun ownership.¹³ It's not necessary to revoke the Second Amendment in order to adopt stringent gun control laws in the United States, but the rogue *Heller* decision must be reversed in order to stringently regulate or ban handguns.

Don't focus solely on school shootings. Most gun deaths of children and youth occur outside of schools. Government officials and school administrators can turn schools into windowless, prison-like institutions, with metal detectors, impenetrable gates, and armed guards substituting for teachers, but how can you focus on learning in such a setting, and who's going to protect you from becoming a victim of gun violence when you leave school? You should demand the adoption of stringent gun control regulations that will protect you and your family from the threat of wanton gun violence anywhere you go.

Don't become sidetracked by peripheral issues. Part of the reason for our failure to stop the epidemic of gun violence in the United States is that after each horrific mass shooting, attention is usually diverted to some issue other than the fact that our country is awash in guns. Of course, issues such as mental illness, substance abuse, and media violence need to be addressed. But the United States is not an outlier as compared with other high income democratic countries with regard to rates of mental illness and substance abuse,¹⁴ and the rate of assault by any means in the United States is lower than the rate in many other high income democratic countries.¹⁵ The areas in which the United States is an extreme outlier are the laxity of our gun control laws¹⁶ and the related extraordinarily high number of guns in circulation.¹⁷

Don't be fooled by the "We need more research" argument. The claim that we need more research to figure out why we keep having mass shootings and how we can stop them is used both by the gun lobby to stall any new gun control laws and by politicians to mask their lack of political courage. There was already enough research in 1968 to justify the statement by the late Senator Thomas Dodd:

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.¹⁸

Since 1968, an enormous amount of additional research has been done demonstrating the need for the adoption of definitive gun control measures in our country. Tragically, though, we haven't adopted such laws, and as a result, since 1968 more U.S. civilians have died of gunshot wounds than all the U.S. soldiers killed in all the wars in which our country has ever been involved.¹⁹ More research, in the absence of the adoption of definitive gun control laws, will only document more senseless, preventable gun related deaths and injuries.

Don't Give Up. As the late South African leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Nelson Mandela, once said, "It always seems impossible until it's done." As impossible as it may seem in today's political climate, we're confident that one day we will adopt stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in every other high income democratic country of the world. The only question is, how many more innocent people, including innocent children and youth, will be killed by guns before that day arrives. Your activism and your passion are helping to make that day come sooner rather than later.

Congratulations on the awakening that your activism as created already concerning the need for definitive gun control laws in our country. Please don't hesitate to contact us if we may be of any further assistance in working with you toward our shared goal of ending the shameful epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our country.

Sincerely,



Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is an emergency physician who has treated innumerable gunshot victims during his more than 30 years in practice. Before becoming a physician, he was an expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps, decorated for "courage under fire" while serving in combat in the Vietnam War.

References

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