



Americans Against Gun Violence
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**2020 National High School Essay Contest
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Protecting Our Core Values

As Americans, we take great pride in our core values of opportunity, freedom, and security. These are some of the values that make our country a unique place in which to innovate and thrive. However, in moments of self-reflection we must be critical of how well we adhere to these values. Over the past several decades, our country has been riddled with tragic mass shootings, many committed by perpetrators using assault weapons.(1) As horrific as mass shootings are, though, they account for only a tiny fraction of all gun-related deaths in our country. In 2017, civilian gun-related deaths reached their highest level in U.S. history(2) with the vast majority of gun-related deaths being committed with handguns(3). This is the clear reality of gun violence in America – a reality that is inconsistent with our core values.

Last year in New Zealand, only 26 days after the mass shootings in two Christchurch mosques in which 51 innocent lives were taken, New Zealand's parliament voted 119-1 to effectively ban civilian ownership of all automatic and semi-automatic firearms, including so-called "assault rifles."(4) This ban was prompted by the first mass shooting in New Zealand in the 21st Century. Meanwhile in the United States, since the tragic Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in 2012, we have had 2,428 more mass shootings in which at least four people, not including the shooter, were killed or injured by gunfire(5). New Zealand's ban took 56,000 firearms off the streets, and there hasn't been another mass shooting since the ban took effect. After mass shootings in Australia and the United Kingdom in 1996, Australia also promptly adopted a ban on civilian ownership of automatic and semi-automatic rifles,(6) and the United Kingdom adopted a ban on civilian ownership of handguns.(7) Both of these countries have had just one mass shooting in the 24 years since the bans went into effect. The rate of gun-related deaths in Australia is currently 1/14th the US rate, and the rate in the UK is 1/52nd the US rate.(8) In Japan, handguns are outright banned, and other legal firearms can be purchased only after an extensive training and background check(9). We can see the effect of these regulations through a single statistic. In 2014, while the US had 33,599 gun deaths, Japan had just six(10).

In reality, a vast majority of Americans support some form of firearm regulations(11). So why, even after 20 first grade children were slaughtered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, has our government failed to pass any major gun control legislation? We are hindered by those who equate gun ownership with patriotism and by organizations like the NRA that spend millions of dollars lobbying to squash even the most limited gun control measures(12). As noted above, the effectiveness of stringent gun control laws has been clearly demonstrated in other democratic countries, yet opponents of gun control in the United States continue to argue, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." It's true, of course, that behind every gun-related homicide or suicide there is a human being pulling the trigger. This rhetoric neglects the fact, though, that with the ready availability of firearms comes an immense facility and efficiency in taking lives. Simply put - guns make killing easier.

Another argument that is frequently heard from gun control opponents is the statement, "The only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." This statement is clearly not true. In the first place, the only rationale for civilians to own military style assault weapons is to defend themselves against other civilians with assault weapons. A ban on civilian ownership of military style assault weapons is clearly preferable to living in a war zone. And even in the case of a mass shooting in progress, an FBI study of 160 active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2013 found 21 cases in which unarmed bystanders disabled the shooter and only one case in which an armed civilian other than a paid security guard or off-duty police officer took the shooter down.(13) FBI data also show that about eight times more people are killed by guns in arguments than in self-defense(14). Similarly, the National Crime Victimization Survey shows us that firearms are utilized to commit crimes about ten times more often than to stop them(14). Finally, the other advanced democratic countries of the world recognize that it's impossible to determine with any acceptable degree of accuracy which "good guys with guns" are going to some day turn into "bad guys with guns." By banning handguns and automatic and semi-automatic rifles, other democracies have both stopped "bad guys" from obtaining guns and "good guys" from becoming "bad guys" with guns.

There is undeniable evidence that the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other advanced democratic countries, including bans on handguns and assault rifles, would drastically reduce rates of firearm-related deaths and injuries in our country. Though we are faced with a deeply rooted opposition, if we are true to our core values, we cannot stop pushing for these regulations, as tens of thousands of American lives are at stake every year.

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