



Americans Against Gun Violence
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**2020 National High School Essay Contest
\$1,000 Winner**

(Students name and high school withheld at students request)

Gun Violence: America's Lost Promise

Found scrawled on a wall in the boys' bathroom: "I'm counting my bullets. I'm loading my clips." Then, this grisly warning: "Don't come to school tomorrow." No one did.

As students trickled into the gymnasium the next day, my eyes darted between the two exits, both facing the parking lot. I hate speeches. But even though I was minutes away from a sea of adolescent critics, I was only worried about the "what-ifs."

I had been hosting fundraisers to help spread awareness about muscular dystrophy, and I'd invited a classmate who suffers from the disorder to share his personal experiences. But my stage fright was suddenly washed away by a wave of sheer panic: if my back is turned, would I be the first victim?

In some U.S. states, students can legally get an AR-15 before a high school diploma. Only in America.

How many more lives must be lost before the country confronts the ghosts of its violent past? How many sons, daughters, athletes, artists, scientists, writers, and activists must die?

Yes, many gun control opponents argue that "Guns don't kill people -- people do." But there is abundant evidence that people with easy access to guns kill people, including themselves, far more often than people living in places where gun ownership is stringently restricted. Almost 40,000 Americans are killed each year by guns - more than 100 a day - and two to three times this many Americans suffer non-fatal gunshot wounds annually. The rate of gun-related deaths in the United States is ten times higher than in the other economically advanced democratic countries of the world, including a gun homicide rate that is 25 times higher and a gun suicide rate that is seven times higher. With numbers like these, why don't we adopt stringent gun control laws in our country like the laws in other advanced democratic countries?

March of this year was the first March without a school shooting since 2002, courtesy of COVID-19. Yet the gun violence epidemic draws comparatively little attention.

Homicide rates are 15 percent lower in states that require universal background checks to purchase guns and 18 percent lower in states that include convictions for violent

misdemeanors, not just felonies, as criteria for prohibiting people from buying handguns. Moreover, lower rates of gun homicides in states with stringent background checks are not associated with higher rates of non-gun homicides. In other words, when guns are less available, people don't generally substitute other weapons for committing homicides. Instead, overall homicide rates go down.

A comparison of two American states illustrates the effectiveness of stronger firearm regulations. It's probably no surprise that Alaska, one of the least-regulated states, has the highest rate of gun deaths, with nearly 21 out of every 100,000 residents killed by guns each year. On the other end of the spectrum, Hawaii, which has some of the strictest firearm regulations in the country, averages just 4 gun-related deaths annually for every 100,000 people. But even Hawaii's gun control laws aren't nearly as stringent as those in other advanced democratic countries. As a result, the annual rate of gun related deaths in Hawaii is almost 5 times higher than the rate in Australia, which banned all automatic and semi-automatic rifles after the Port Arthur mass shooting in 1996; and almost 21 times higher than in the United Kingdom, which banned all handguns after the Dunblane Primary School mass shooting in the same year.

We should have acted long ago to stanch the bleeding. But conservative lawmakers, cowed by the National Rifle Association, have kept the gun control debate in limbo, and not even the most progressive lawmakers have had the political courage to advocate the adoption of stringent gun control laws like those in Australia and the UK.

Since the Columbine massacre shattered the country's illusions about school safety in 1999, students have felt physically unsafe in the classroom. Older generations have failed to enact the kinds of stringent gun control laws necessary to protect our children and our youth. My generation must be the voice of reason and take charge of the national conversation, beginning with dispelling what the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger called "one of the greatest pieces of fraud" on the American people that he had seen in his lifetime – the myth promoted by the gun lobby that the Second Amendment was intended to confer an individual right to own guns.

Our relationship with guns has grown from an affection to an addiction. As a nation, we are poorer for it. The dead and wounded are America's lost promise.

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