



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

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(Student's high school withheld at student's request)

*The Epidemic They Ignore*

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown the world into an unprecedented chaos. Life has been put on pause; restaurants, stores, parks shut down. It's not a question of if, but when the next wave of the virus will hit. People are terrified for their lives. This feeling of dread, the fear for our lives, the waiting for what's to come next - that's not a new feeling for the students of America.

That's the way we have felt every day.

Sandy Hook is the first shooting I can remember. I was in Kindergarten or First Grade at the time, and I remember how they explained what had happened. First, they pulled every kid in my grade into one room. It was hot and cramped and none of us knew why we were there, and that's when they told us. They told us that kids our age had been shot; that it could happen here and that we needed to be careful. That is the America I grew up in: a country that values guns more than me. A country where we hide under tables and in cabinets once a month, and now, since Parkland and Santa Fe, one where my peers and I panic every time the fire alarm goes off because, what if it's a trap? This is more than an epidemic; it's a sick cornerstone of our society. It's not tragic; it's deadly. It's not plaguing our nation; it has sunk deep into its roots, into the subconscious of every American, especially Americans that are federally mandated to walk into a school every day. It has become normal, so that we do things like lockdown drills and watch badly made safety videos while we laugh it off and internalize the death and fear that our own nation has placed inside of us. This isn't an American epidemic, this is America.

When a shooting happens, life doesn't go on pause. Stores and restaurants don't close. Just more deaths. Nowadays, most people barely even bat an eye. Nothing we can do about it, right? How can you look at me, a student, and tell me that the coronavirus epidemic and the gun violence epidemic are different? "Action on coronavirus doesn't infringe on my rights," you say, but what about my right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? I have spent the last two years of my life begging adults to listen, drafting proposed gun violence prevention legislation myself and lobbying at our State Capitol. Over the past few months, I've seen legislators who have long turned a blind eye to our

pleas to take definitive action to stop our country's deadly epidemic of gun violence suddenly spring into action in response to the coronavirus pandemic. "It's a crisis," they say, and yet so is gun violence.

So is gun violence.

It's well documented that infection with COVID-19 causes minimal if any symptoms in most children and youth, yet we are taking it seriously in order to safeguard our elders. We are staying home and abiding by the regulations. Gun violence, on the other hand, disproportionately affects youth like me.

When the coronavirus pandemic is over, how will the adults in power protect our health in return for our dedication to protecting theirs?