



Americans Against Gun Violence
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**2020 National High School Essay Contest
\$250 Winner**

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Now is the Time for Change

On April 25, 2017, at the young age of 12, I was sitting in my favorite class in eighth grade, American History. It was approximately 12:45pm, and the bell was about to ring. My friends and I were getting ready to go to our next class, but then, we heard an abrupt announcement: "Herricks Middle School is now entering lockdown mode." After finding out that this was not just a drill, that there was a real gunman, I can say with certainty that my classmates and I felt as though we just got injected with anxiety and fear beyond imagination. After everyone was brought to safety, students, parents, and teachers alike were questioning why there was a threat in the first place - a civilian with a gun.

It is up to our generation to show why banning guns is the most effective way of reducing firearm-related injuries. Banning large classes of guns significantly reduces the number of guns in circulation, and it's logical to assume that reducing the number of privately owned guns would reduce all forms of gun-related deaths and injuries. Other advanced democratic countries have proved that this assumption is true. And they've also proved that when guns are less available, people usually don't substitute some other means for committing suicide or homicide. We need to follow the examples of those other countries.

In April of 1996, a man killed 35 people and injured 18 others in Australia using an AR-15 and another semi-automatic rifle. Within 12 days, the Australian government reached an agreement to ban all automatic and semi-automatic long guns (rifles and shotguns) – not just so-called "assault weapons."⁽¹⁾ The mandatory long gun ban and buyback in 1996 was followed by a voluntary handgun buyback in 2003.⁽²⁾ In addition, Australian citizens turned in about 200,000 other guns that were not banned and for which no monetary compensation was offered. In all, about a million guns, representing a third of the country's entire stock of privately owned firearms, were destroyed.⁽³⁾ Breathtakingly, there had been 13 mass shootings, defined as an incident in which at least five people, not including the shooter, were killed by gunfire, before the 1996 ban went into effect. There were no further mass shootings in Australia for the next 22 years, and there was no increase in the rate of non-gun homicides or suicides.⁽⁴⁾ The rate of gun-related deaths in Australia is currently 1/14th the rate in the United States.⁽⁵⁾

The United Kingdom (UK) also experienced a tragic mass shooting in 1996. A man who legally owned handguns shot and killed 16 first grade students and their teacher and wounded 13 other children and teachers at the elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland.(6) The UK already had bans on automatic and semi-automatic long guns. Within less than two years after the Dunblane mass shooting, the UK banned civilian ownership of handguns completely and bought back 162,000 privately owned guns and 700 tons of ammunition.(7) There have been no further mass shootings in the UK committed with handguns since the ban was enacted.(6) As in the case of Australia, there was no increase in rates of non-gun homicides or suicides after the handgun ban went into effect. The rate of gun related deaths in the UK is currently 1/52nd the rate in the United States.(5)

The benefits of banning handguns and automatic and semi-automatic handguns are apparent as shown by the examples of the UK and Australia. As the number of guns accessible to civilians goes down, the number of deaths due to gun violence decreases significantly, and there is no increase in other forms of self-harm or assault. Yet, the United States has not made an effort to reduce the number of privately owned guns. In fact, America owns 46% of the global stock of civilian guns despite making up only 4% of the world's population(8). Many American gun control opponents try to defend their ownership of guns by claiming that it is for "self-defense." It's noteworthy, though, that Australia, the UK, and many other democratic countries don't accept "self-defense" as a legitimate reason for owning a gun.(5) This isn't because people in those countries don't value their own safety. It's because they recognize that widespread civilian gun ownership results in much more risk than benefit. In one of the many studies attesting to this fact, it was shown that someone who was carrying a gun at the time of an assault was 4.5 times more likely to get shot and 4.2 times more likely to get killed than someone who wasn't carrying a gun.(9)

There is a need for the youth of our generation to step up and remind the nation that during a time of many struggles, including the Covid-19 pandemic, in the long term, gun violence is our country's most deadly epidemic of all. We need to rejuvenate the battle against civilian gun ownership.

Most other advanced democratic nations promptly adopted stringent gun control laws in response to mass shootings. We, the United States, have already experienced enough mass shootings. We do not need to live through more to understand that now is the time for change.

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