



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2021 National High School Essay Contest
\$1,000 Winner

(Student's name withheld at student's request)

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Sikhs in America: A Unique Perspective on the Gun Violence Epidemic

In the same week that I celebrated turning eighteen and being fully vaccinated, I was forced to grapple with news that Sikhs working in an Indianapolis FedEx store, some of whom had just immigrated from India and were collecting their first paycheck in America, were gunned down and murdered. At a time when I was considering a long-awaited reunion with loved ones and while we are all making tentative steps to re-open society and commerce after COVID, the increasing threat of gun violence is pushing us to reconsider our public spaces.

While watching the news from Indianapolis, it was impossible to avoid reliving August 5, 2012, when a gunman opened fire on the Wisconsin Sikh Temple that my grandparents attended. They were minutes from entering the Temple when eleven members of the congregation were shot, with seven losing their lives. Most of us have now a personal connection to gun violence whether through our family, our community, or our extended social media networks. There is no longer any "local tragedy;" they are felt across the country.

When the insurrection occurred at the Capitol, my eyes moved between screens, watching white supremacists lay siege to one of the world's leading democratic institutions. The feelings I felt then, hopelessness and anxiety, were magnified as I watched news unfold about the most recent attack on my Sikh community. As the country is opening up, we are going to encounter more gun violence tragedies. It should not be like this. Teenagers should not have to dread the end of a pandemic because it kept them safe in their homes from gun violence.

I am going to college in the Fall and I find myself considering the risk of being shot on campus and how to keep myself safe. High school graduates should not be watching college campus videos thinking, "Where am I least likely to be shot." We should be looking forward to enjoying the college experience, studying with friends, and worrying over science labs, not thinking about our surroundings for a quick way out in case a shooter storms the classroom. Stringent gun control laws are long overdue, and it is abhorrent that many lawmakers in Congress put the safety of the people behind demands of special interest groups like the NRA.

Every tragedy brings a new generation of youth traumatized by gun violence. From Oak Creek to Mother Emanuel, from Sandy Hook to Parkland, and from Indianapolis to Columbine, the threat of violence demands action. In each instance, we see weapons that should not have been on the streets and people who should not have had easy access to these instruments of death. Other advanced democratic countries have reacted swiftly and definitively to such tragedies to prevent them from recurring, including by banning civilian ownership of all automatic and semi-automatic long guns in the cases of Australia and New Zealand, and by banning civilian ownership of handguns as well in the case of Great Britain. It's up to our generation to ensure that we take comparably swift and definitive action in our own country in order to spare future generations from experiencing the trauma of gun violence that has become the norm for us all.