



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2021 National High School Essay Contest
First Place Winner
\$3,000 Award

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Weapons of Self-Destruction

“Do you guys remember what life was like before COVID?” joked Comedian Dave Chappelle on Saturday Night Live. “I do. It was a mass shooting every week....Thank God for COVID.”

As shelter-in-place guidelines altered life for millions of Americans, media coverage of mass shootings was replaced with news about infection rates, masks, and hospitalizations. However, unbeknownst to Americans, the high-profile mass shootings that dominate the media account for less than 5% of gun violence deaths. Gun-related homicides, accidents, and suicides that make up the vast majority of gun deaths did not stop during the pandemic. According to the website, Gun Violence Archive, 2020 was the deadliest year in U.S. history, with 44,000 gun-related deaths, a majority of which were self-inflicted. An amalgamation of pandemic isolation, fear of civil unrest, and easy access to lethal weapons has created a perfect storm for gun suicides amongst America’s youth.

The emergence of COVID-19 brought pervasive uncertainties and nationwide civil unrest. Fearing riots and anarchy, Americans legally purchased 40 million guns, a 300% increase from 2019. While Americans bought guns to feel safer, the guns they brought into their homes endangered their whole family, especially young adults. It’s been shown that for every one time a gun in the home is used to shoot and kill an intruder, there are 43 gun-related suicides, homicides, or fatal accidental shootings of a household member.

When COVID-19 lockdowns forced schools to close, kids were separated from their friends, creating feelings of isolation, anxiety, and frustration. As a result, during the same period that Americans bought guns in record numbers, 1 in 4 young adults reported suicidal ideation, overwhelming mental health crisis centers. Lonely and depressed children with access to firearms are a deadly combination, especially since guns are the most lethal way to commit suicide.

Take, for example, brothers Farhan and Tavir Towhid, whose chronic mental illness was exacerbated by the pandemic. In April, the brothers killed their family and themselves with

recently purchased firearms. On Instagram, they bragged about how easy it was for them to lie about their mental health history to buy guns, posting, "Gun control in the U.S. is a joke."

How many tragedies will it take before America is able to create meaningful change? Decades of lobbying by the NRA have created the false narrative that "Guns don't kill, people do." In the case of suicide, access to an impulsive and highly lethal instrument of self-destruction is the problem and is amplified by the pandemic. The only solution to reducing the extraordinarily high rate of tragic gun related deaths in our country to levels comparable to those in other high income democratic countries is to adopt comparably stringent gun control laws - laws that will drastically reduce the availability of firearms.

As lockdowns abate, sensational firearm massacres have once again become front-page news, but the silent suffering of millions of youths has gone unrecognized. Unless we enact strict gun-control laws to limit access to firearms, it is inevitable that more incidents like the Towhid brothers' will occur. Now is the time to act, before we condemn America's youth to another decade of gun tragedies.

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