



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

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*Untitled*

On the first day of Honors Biology, my teacher went over the active shooter lockdown procedure; calm was key. We would lock the doors, close the blinds, and slide underneath the tables on the side of the room nearest to the windows. We would turn off our phones. We would be quiet. And we would wait.

As twenty other freshmen and I eyed the dirty tile floor by the window, I thought about how this whole thing was absolutely absurd to someone from any other country but the United States. All because here, people want easy access to firearms more than they want kids to stop getting gunned down in school.

Surprisingly, the gun violence epidemic hasn't gotten any better with the country shut down. A number of factors borne from COVID-19 have contributed to a "pressure-cooker" effect, including high unemployment rates and worry over infection combined with stress attributed to gun-related violence. The results? Explosive. Cincinnati's murder rate has more than doubled. Shootings in Louisville increased by 82% from 2019. May, 2020, saw more mass shootings in the U.S. than any month since 2013, at 56 incidents. And in January 2021, the violent insurrection at the Capitol inspired new fear. If the Nation's Capitol couldn't be defended - if violence could be permitted in what was supposed to be an almost sacred space - what safe place was left? All of these issues have intersected and compounded the growing fear and visceral stress present in the minds of young people, who have everything from school to work to family to worry about too.

The adoption of stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries is essential in order to significantly reduce rates of gun related deaths and injuries in our country and to protect our children and youth from the threat of gun violence. While many gun violence prevention organizations - and even some respected researchers - claim that limited measures such as expanding background checks are all that is needed, it's naïve, given the direct relationship between rates of gun ownership and rates of gun deaths, to believe that these kinds of limited measures that don't reduce the extraordinarily high rate of gun ownership in our country will have a significant effect in reducing our extraordinarily high rate of gun violence. Other high

income democratic countries like Australia, New Zealand, and the UK have reacted swiftly and definitively to mass shootings by banning the kinds of weapons used in the shootings and by requiring everyone who already owned such weapons to surrender them to be destroyed in return for monetary compensation. We should do the same.

It took Australia and New Zealand less than two weeks to ban semi-automatic long guns after the Port Arthur and Christchurch mass shootings, respectively, and it took the UK less than two years to ban handguns after the Dunblane Primary School mass shooting. While there are significant hurdles to adopting similar laws in the United States – including, in the case of banning handguns, the Supreme Court's rogue 2008 *Heller* decision - the obstacles are not insurmountable, and we shouldn't wait for the next mass shooting before tackling them. The physical and mental wellbeing of young people across the nation hangs in the balance, and this is not an issue we can afford to let slide. Not when firearms are the second leading cause of death among American youth, not when 8 children die each day from gun violence and another 32 are injured, and not when the United States has borne witness to 1,316 school shootings since 1970. We owe it to the children of tomorrow to make this country a better place to grow up in, a better place to go to school in - and a better place in which to live.