



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2023 National High School Essay Contest \$1,000 Award Winner

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Something Is Wrong Here

I have never known a world without gun violence. I am in my last year of high school, graduating class of 2023, and I was born in 2004. Five years after Columbine, three years before Virginia Tech, and eight years before Sandy Hook. The first I heard of school shootings was in 2010 when I was in kindergarten. My kindergarten was attached to a larger elementary/middle school, so we had to practice active shooter drills along with the upper grades.

My kindergarten classmates and I were so young that we didn't understand the true nature of the drills. Parents and teachers tried to explain it to us gently with words like "bad man" and "safety measure," which only fueled our fear. If the adults were scared, surely there was something to be afraid of. Once every few months, snack time and recess and learning the ABCs would be interrupted by lockdowns. Teachers would shut off the lights and huddle us into a corner of the classroom, shushing us and drying tears and distracting us from the toys and crafts we had left behind.

They would whisper, "If a bad man came into the school, he would be able to hear you; he would find us," as the principal stalked through the halls and peered into classrooms, ensuring every door was locked, every curtain was drawn. I have known since then, since kindergarten, that something is very wrong here. In America, in our schools, in a world where parents drop their children off at school in the morning only to have to identify their bodies hours later.

The ritual act of simulating a school shooting is deeply traumatic to young children, but it is no better for older kids. Adults gave up on protecting our feelings once we entered middle and high school because then kids our age were the ones doing the shooting. We were the victims, but we were also the greatest threats. Eventually, I stopped being afraid of lockdowns themselves, and became more afraid of the reasons we needed them.

Something Is Wrong Here

When I was in middle school, a boy in the grade below me brought a gun to school. He had a list. The gun was confiscated from his locker before he got the chance to use it, but if he had reached it first, no locked classroom doors were going to stop him from crossing off names. Often times, shooters are very familiar with the places they terrorize. This boy with the gun had done lockdown drills with us in that school. He knew which corner of the classroom we would be hiding in because he had hidden there too.

People with guns are not going to be stopped by darkened rooms and drawn blinds. Lockdown drills do nothing but frighten children and give a paper-thin illusion of safety. They have never stopped a killer, and they have only been a distraction from the real solution to school shootings the whole time, gun control.