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Sharing the Blame for the Apalachee High School Mass Shooting

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence

On September 4, 2024, a 14 year-old student at Apalachee High School in Winder, Georgia, brought an AR-15 style rifle to school and killed two fellow 14 year-old students and two teachers and wounded nine other students and staff.¹ The student, Colt Gray, was known to have serious mental health problems. His mother, with whom Colt no longer lived and who was estranged from his father, reportedly called the school on the morning of the shooting to warn officials of an impending “extreme emergency” and the need to immediately locate her son.²

It’s also been reported that Colt’s mother, maternal aunt, and maternal grandmother had repeatedly tried to get mental health care for Colt well before the day of the shooting. Annie Brown, Colt’s maternal aunt, stated that Colt himself had been “begging for help from everyone around him.”³ Colt’s maternal grandfather, Charles Polhamus, blamed the shooting on Colt’s father, Colin Gray, with whom Colt lived in the months prior to the shooting. Colt’s father reportedly gave Colt the rifle he used in the shooting as a Christmas present in 2023, despite the fact that the father had been contacted in May of 2023 by law enforcement officers who suspected Colt of posting online threats to commit a mass school shooting.⁴ According to Polhamus, Gray was an abusive father, but according to other reports, Polhamus’s daughter – Colt’s mother – also had a history of drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence and had been reported to the Georgia Division of Family & Children Services for alleged child neglect.⁵

Colt Gray reportedly surrendered without resistance to two on-campus police officers within two minutes after he began shooting.⁶ He is being tried as an adult and has been charged with felony murder. His father, Colin Gray, has also been arrested and has been charged with second degree murder and manslaughter. As of the time of this writing, no motive has been reported for the shooting.

While there has been a brief flurry of media attention concerning the circumstances surrounding the Apalachee High School mass shooting, little if any attention has been paid to the fact the United States is the only country in the world in which school shootings occur on a regular basis. Similarly, there’s been little comment concerning the fact that there are no federal or Georgia state gun control laws that prohibit a child from

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possessing an AR-15 style rifle or any other rifle or shotgun; nor are there federal or Georgia state laws that prohibit a parent from allowing a child to have access to such weapons.⁷

So who's to blame for the horrific Apalachee High School mass shooting? Up to the time of this writing, just Colt Gray and his father have been formally charged with crimes. It would not be surprising, though, if in coming days, families of the teachers and students who were killed in the shooting and other victims who were wounded file lawsuits claiming that others, possibly including school officials and staff in the Georgia Division of Family & Children Services, were negligent in not preventing the mass shooting.

I would assert, however, that all of us who are members of adult society in the United States of America bear some of the responsibility for not only the Apalachee High School mass shooting, but for other school shootings, for mass shootings committed in settings other than school campuses, and for the fact that on an average day in our country, more than 120 U.S. residents are killed with guns⁸ and at least twice this many people suffer non-fatal but often devastating, life-changing gunshot wounds.⁹

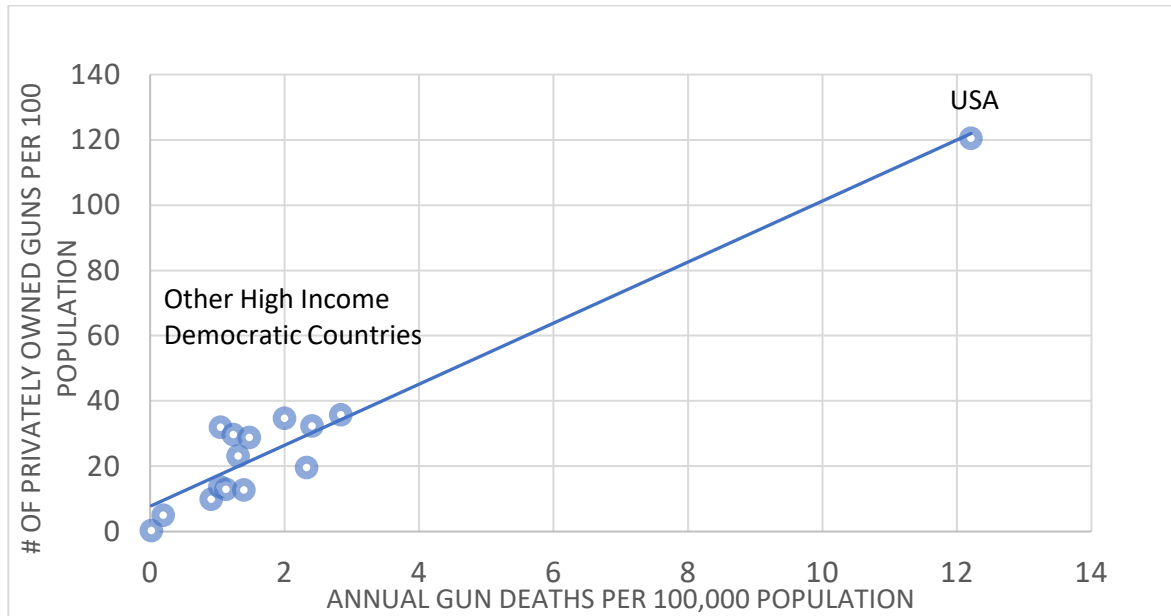
The Apalachee High School mass shooting was the 46th shooting on a U.S. college or K-12 school campus in 2024, according to a study by CNN.¹⁰ A previous CNN study had shown that over a 10 year period during which there were 288 shootings on U.S. college or school campuses, there were two school shootings in Canada, two in France, one in Germany, and none in other high income democratic countries. Since 2020, gunshot wounds have become the leading cause of death for U.S. children and youth,¹¹ but school shootings account for only a small fraction of these gun-related deaths. The vast majority of these killings occur away from school campuses. The rate of gun-related homicides of U.S. high school age youth is a staggering 82 times higher than the average rate in other high income democratic countries.¹² The rate of gun-related homicides for all ages combined in the United States is 25 times the rate in other economically advanced democracies.¹³

Colt Gray certainly deserved better mental health care – and better parenting - in the years and months leading up to the shooting. It's possible, and perhaps even likely, that if he'd received appropriate care, the shooting wouldn't have happened. On the other hand, persons with overt mental illness are involved in a small fraction of all gun homicides in the United States, and they're more likely to be the victims than the perpetrators.¹⁴ While mental health care and child protective services in the United States certainly need to be improved, there's no evidence to suggest that higher rates of mental illness or child neglect in our country account for our extraordinarily high rate of school shootings and other gun-related homicides as compared with other high income democratic countries.¹⁵

It's an undeniable fact that if Colt Gray didn't have access to a gun, he couldn't have committed the Apalachee High School mass shooting. It's also undeniable that the factor

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that most clearly explains our country's extraordinarily high rate of gun violence is the extraordinarily high number of privately owned guns in our country, which is due in turn to our extraordinarily lax gun control laws as compared with the laws in all the other high income democratic countries of the world. As the graph below shows, there's a direct correlation between rates of privately owned guns and rates of gun-related deaths, with the United States being an extreme outlier in both categories.¹⁶



We as a country have known – or should have known - for more than half a century what we need to do to stop our country's shameful epidemic of gun violence. In June of 1968, the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut stated in a press release¹⁷ and in a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate:¹⁸

Pious condolences will no longer suffice....Quarter measures and half measures will no longer suffice....The time has now come that we must adopt stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world.

Unfortunately, we haven't heeded Senator Dodd's advice, and as a result, since 1968 more U.S. civilians have died of gunshot wounds than all the U.S. soldiers killed by any means in all the wars in which our country has even been involved.¹⁹

The United Kingdom has some of the most stringent gun control laws of any high income democratic country in the world.²⁰ Correspondingly, the UK, represented by the dot that is the second closest to the origin on the graph above, has one of the lowest rates of gun ownership and gun-related deaths. In 2022, the most recent year for which data are currently available for both the UK and the United States, there were 29 gun-related homicides in the UK²¹ and 19,651 gun-related homicides in the United States.²² The

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population of the United States is 5.75 times the population of the UK. From these figures it can be calculated that in 2022, the gun-related homicide rate in the United States was more than 130 times the rate in the UK.

It has long been the policy in the UK that anyone who wants to acquire a gun must first show a good reason to own one, such as being a member of a hunting or target shooting club.²³ Recognizing that there's no net protective value in civilian gun ownership in a civil society, like many other high income democratic countries, the UK doesn't accept "self-defense" as a legitimate reason for gun ownership. All firearms must be registered with the police, and gun owners must obtain a separate license for each gun they own.

Following a mass shooting in Hungerford, England, in 1987 in which 16 people were killed and 15 others were wounded by a man who legally owned the semi-automatic rifles and a semi-automatic handgun he used in the killings, the British government reacted promptly by completely banning civilian ownership of semi-automatic rifles and pump-action shotguns.²⁴ The UK didn't change its handgun laws after the Hungerford mass shooting, but following a subsequent mass shooting at the elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, in 1996 in which 16 five and six year-old children and their teacher were killed and 13 other students and teachers were wounded by a shooter armed only with legally owned handguns, the British government completely banned civilian handgun ownership.²⁵ There hasn't been another school shooting in the UK since the handgun ban went into effect.

Prior to 2008, there was no constitutional obstacle to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in the UK. In the 2008 *Heller* decision,²⁶ though, a narrow 5-4 majority of justices reversed over two centuries of legal precedent, including four prior Supreme Court decisions,²⁷ in ruling for the first time in U.S. history that the Second Amendment conferred an individual right to own guns unrelated to service in a "well regulated militia." Ironically, among the many false assertions in the *Heller* majority opinion concerning the history of the Second Amendment is the claim that the Amendment "codified" into the U.S. Constitution a broad right to private gun ownership that our country's founders inherited from their English ancestors.²⁸ A former British member of Parliament who helped enact the handgun ban follow the Dunblane Primary School mass shooting has described this claim as "preposterous."²⁹ The English people do not have – and never have had – a broad right to private gun ownership.

Despite our best efforts to get other U.S. gun violence prevention (GVP) organization to join us, [Americans Against Gun Violence](#) remains the only GVP organization in our entire country that openly advocates and is actively working toward overturning the rogue 2008 *Heller* decision and its progeny, which now includes the *McDonald*³⁰ and *Bruen*³¹ decisions, and toward adopting stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in the UK. Last fall, we brought Dr. Michael North of Scotland to the United States to be our keynote speaker at our annual dinner in Sacramento,

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California. Dr. North lost his five year old daughter, Sophie, in the Dunblane Primary School mass shooting, and he subsequently helped lead the successful campaign to ban handguns in the UK.

We're not planning an annual dinner this fall for a couple of reasons. One is that we thought that so much attention would be focused on the 2024 presidential election that turnout at the dinner might be low. The main reason, though, for not planning an annual dinner this fall is that after bringing Dr. North to be our keynote speaker last year, we couldn't think of anyone else who would be as qualified to speak on the subject of gun violence prevention. In particular, we know of no one who's suffered a greater personal loss than Dr. North or who's subsequently done more to ensure that no one else in his country – and in particular, no child, no parent, and no teacher – will ever have to suffer another tragedy like the Dunblane Primary School massacre.

Dr. North, who prefers to be addressed by his nickname, "Mick," stayed with my wife and me in our home last fall, and Mick and I also had the opportunity to talk quite a bit as we travelled to other speaking venues that we'd arranged for him following the annual dinner in Sacramento. Whether or not you were able to meet Mick and hear him speak in person last fall, I recommend that you [view the video of his keynote address](#), or at least [read the text of his speech](#), which you can access via links on the [Events and Other Resources page](#) of the Americans Against Gun Violence website. I'll conclude this message by quoting the final paragraph from Mick's keynote address.

I'll finish by reflecting on something Bill has said to me on a number of occasions, that "Britain and other countries have shown through their actions, and not just their words, that they love their children more than their guns." We and the rest of Britain responded to Dunblane in a way which showed beyond doubt how much more we love our children than we love guns. I sincerely hope that sometime soon Americans find a way to take the boldest possible measures so that this can be said of your country too. Your children deserve nothing less.

Yours truly



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President, Americans Against Gun Violence

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²⁰ The United Kingdom includes Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. The latter three countries are referred to as “Britain” or “Great Britain,” and have essentially identical gun control laws. The laws in Northern Ireland differ in some respects from those in Britain, but gun violence statistics are typically reported for the UK as a whole. In the remainder of this message, when reference is made to UK or British gun control laws, the author is referring to the laws in England, Scotland, and Wales.

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