



Americans Against Gun Violence
7862 Winding Way #151
Fair Oaks, CA 95628
(916) 668-4160
aagunv.org / info@aagunv.org

Announcing our 2025 Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest... with mixed emotions

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence

Every year when we announce the opening of our annual Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest, I'm pleased on the one hand, and deeply troubled on the other. And this year, I'm more troubled than ever.

I'm pleased because I believe that our essay contest, which we've hosted annually since 2018, is an important way of stimulating and rewarding critical thinking on the part of high school age youth concerning the definitive measures needed to stop our country's epidemic of gun violence. I'm also pleased that the contest gives students a platform to publicly express their views on this subject in a setting other than the brief flurry of media attention that typically follows school mass shootings. And I'd like to think that the prompts that we use for our essay contest help educate and stimulate critical thinking even among some students – and some teachers - who read the essay prompts but who don't enter the contest.

I'm deeply troubled, on the other hand, by the fact that there's a need for U.S. high school students to be concerned about the threat of gun violence, including the threat of shootings at their own schools. We members of older generations in the United States should have taken definitive action decades ago to stop this shameful epidemic. Instead, now more than ever, we seem to be a nation that loves its guns more than its children.

More than half a century ago, in June of 1968, the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut stated in a press release¹ and in a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate:²

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 in all the wars in which our country has ever been involved;³ the rate of gun-related homicide for all ages combined in our country is 25 times higher than the average for the other high income democratic countries of the world;⁴ the gun homicide rate for U.S. high school age youth is 82 times higher;⁵ and the United States is the only high income democratic country in the world in which mass shootings, including shootings on school campuses, occur on a regular basis.⁶

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We used the last sentence in the above quotation from Senator Dodd as the prompt for our first Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest in 2018. It's important to note that in 1968, when Senator Dodd made that statement, there was no constitutional obstacle, Second Amendment or otherwise, to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries. It would not be until the 2008 *Heller* decision⁷ that a narrow 5-4 majority of Supreme Court Justices would reverse over two centuries of legal precedent, including four prior Supreme Court opinions,⁸ by ruling for the first time in U.S. history that the Second Amendment conferred an individual right to own a gun unrelated to service in the "well regulated militia" described in the first half of the Amendment. Now, in order to adopt stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries - including a ban on civilian ownership of handguns comparable to the ban that Britain promptly adopted after a mass shooting at an elementary school that was committed with a handgun,⁹ and a ban on civilian ownership of all automatic and semi-automatic long guns (not just so-called "assault rifles") that Britain,¹⁰ Australia,¹¹ and New Zealand¹² all promptly adopted after mass shootings committed with these kinds of weapons - we must first overturn the *Heller* decision and it's progeny.¹³

As shown in the list of other Americans Against Gun Violence essay contest prompts below, in 2019 we used an excerpt from Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun's majority opinion in the 1982 *Lewis* decision¹⁴ to help make students aware that as of the time of that decision, there was still no Second Amendment right to gun ownership that did not have "some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia," a phrase that Justice Blackmun quoted from the Supreme Court's earlier 1939 *Miller* decision.¹⁵

In 2020, to emphasize that banning civilian ownership of both handguns and so-called "assault weapons" was not a radical idea and that there was still no constitutional obstacle to adopting such bans at the beginning of the 21st century, we used a quotation from the position statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics published in April of 2000 in which the pediatricians advocated that banning handguns and assault weapons would be "the most effective way to reduce firearm-related injuries."¹⁶

In 2022, we used another Second Amendment related quotation as our essay contest prompt – a statement that the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger made during an interview on the PBS NewsHour in 1991 in which he called the misrepresentation of the Second Amendment by the gun lobby "one of the greatest pieces of fraud" on the American public by special interest groups that he'd ever seen in his lifetime.¹⁷

In 2023, we received a record number of entries in our essay contest – more than 1,100 in all, including at least one essay from students in every state in the nation - when as our essay contest prompt, we asked students to describe their thoughts about lockdown drills conducted in response to the threat of school shootings. Most students described far more harm than benefit from lockdown drills, and many expressed an awareness of the fact that the United States is an extreme outlier in terms of our rates not only of school shootings, but of gun violence in general. Some students described the Second Amendment as being an obstacle to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries, but very few students demonstrated an awareness of the fact that at the time that they were born - prior to the June 26, 2008 *Heller* decision in most cases - the Second Amendment had never been interpreted by the Supreme Court as conferring an individual right to gun ownership unrelated to service in a

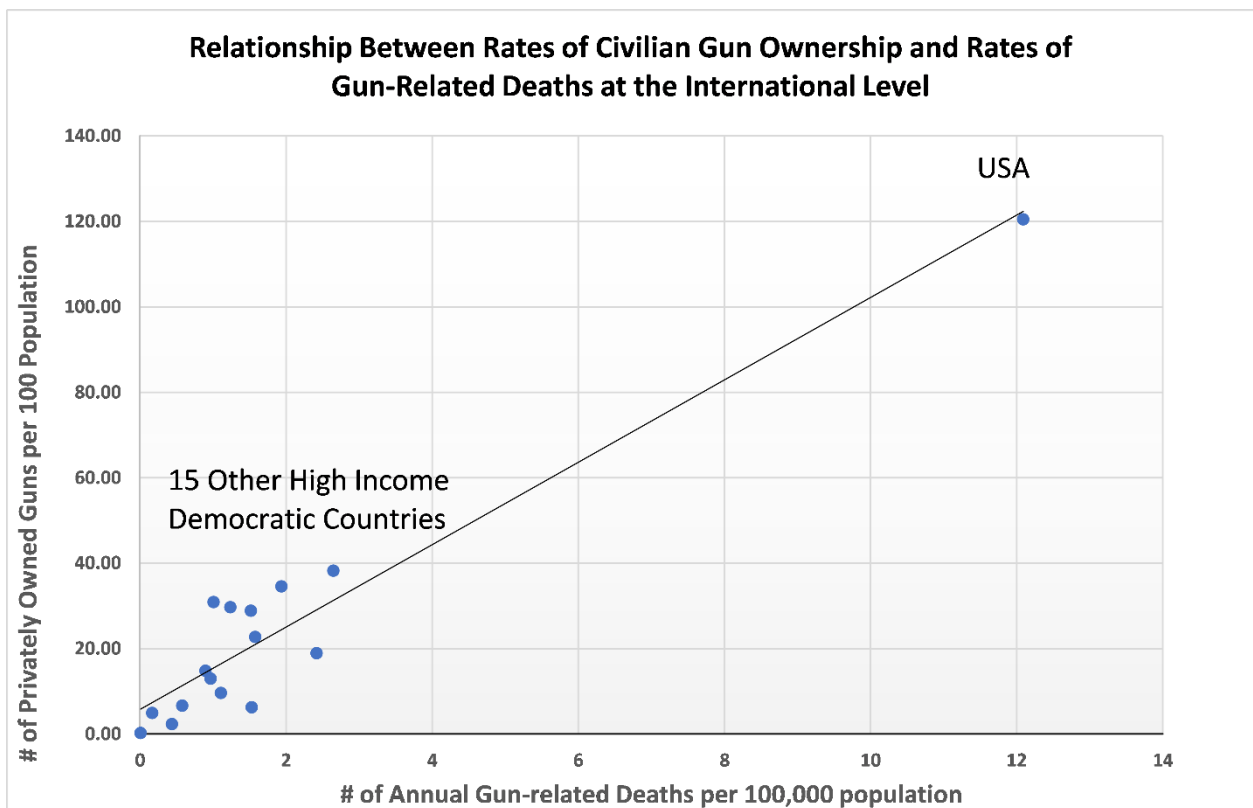
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“well regulated militia.”

At the suggestion of some of our 2023 essay contest winners, we used the following excerpt from our Americans Against Gun Violence mission statement as the prompt for our 2024 essay contest, emphasizing that it was not the Second Amendment itself but rather the 2008 *Heller* decision and its progeny that were the constitutional obstacles to the adoption of definitive gun control laws in our country:

In creating constitutional obstacles, where none previously existed, to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries, the Supreme Court’s 2008 *Heller* decision and its progeny are literally death sentences for tens of thousands of Americans annually.¹⁸

To emphasize the fact that in order to reduce rates of gun-related deaths in the United States to levels comparable to those in other high income democratic countries, we need to adopt stringent gun control laws that will drastically reduce the current vast pool of privately owned guns in our country, we included the graph below¹⁹ both in our mission statement and in the 2024 essay contest flyer:



As in previous years, the winning essays in our 2024 essay contest were poignant, eloquent, and on target. We received far fewer essay contest entries in 2024, though, as compared with 2023 (353 in 2024 versus 1,134 in 2023), and a surprisingly large numbers

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of students who entered the 2024 contest expressed a contrarian point of view in their essays, contending that the Second Amendment was always intended to confer an individual right to own guns and/or dismissing any relationship between our extraordinarily high rate of private gun ownership and our extraordinarily high rate of gun-related deaths.

Although we're always inspired by the winning essays in our annual essay contest, we also learn from the essays that aren't chosen as winners. It wasn't terribly surprising that a number of contrarian 2024 essay contest entrants either parroted or paraphrased the gun lobby mantras that "guns don't kill people, people kill people," that the Second Amendment is the "last defense against tyranny," and that private citizens need "guns for protection." It was both surprising and instructive, though, to find that several contrarian authors cited advanced placement high school government classes as the sources for these points of view. It was also both somewhat surprising and disappointing that even many of the students who understood the need to overturn the *Heller* decision confused the minimalist measures advocated by other U.S. gun violence prevention organizations with the stringent gun control measures advocated by Americans Against Gun Violence.

This year, we've decided to once again use an excerpt from a pre-*Heller* opinion by a Supreme Court Justice as the prompt for our 2025 essay contest. Beginning in 1960, gun control opponents began seeding the law and history literature with pseudo-academic articles and texts that argued that courts and historians had been wrong about the Second Amendment all along.²⁰ Using quotations taken out of context and other revisionist history, gun lobby propagandists argued that the Second Amendment had always been intended to confer an individual right to own guns unrelated to service in the "well regulated militia" described in the first half of the Amendment. The late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas recognized this insidious disinformation campaign as it was happening. He wrote in his opinion in the 1972 case of *Adams v. Williams*:

A powerful lobby dins into the ears of our citizenry that these gun purchases are constitutional rights protected by the Second Amendment, which reads, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

There is under our decisions no reason why stiff state laws governing the purchase and possession of pistols may not be enacted. There is no reason why pistols may not be barred from anyone with a police record. There is no reason why a State may not require a purchaser of a pistol to pass a psychiatric test. There is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police.²¹

We're using an abbreviated version of this statement (replacing the middle two sentences in the second paragraph with ellipses) as the prompt for our 2025 essay contest.

Students who are compulsive enough to carefully read the entire *Adams* decision may note that the above excerpt is taken from a dissenting opinion by Justice Douglas, not the majority opinion, and that his comment about the Second Amendment was an aside (*dicta*, in legal jargon), not directly related to the final ruling in the case. Students may also take note of the fact that Justice Douglas focuses on pistols (aka handguns), not "assault weapons." These facts don't detract, however, from the relevance of Justice Douglas's comments to the proper interpretation of the Second Amendment today.

The question that the Supreme Court considered in the *Adams v. Williams* case was

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whether Robert Williams had been subjected to unreasonable search and seizure in violation of his Fourth Amendment right when he was arrested for illegally possessing a handgun - not whether he had a constitutional right to own a handgun under the Second Amendment. The majority ruled that the arrest had been done legally, but Justices Douglas and Marshall dissented on this point. There was no disagreement among the nine justices, though, concerning Justice Douglas's comments about the Second Amendment. The reason why the Second Amendment was not at issue in the case was that it was so well accepted at this time in our nation's history that the Second Amendment did not confer an individual right to own a gun that attorneys realized that it would be futile to appeal a conviction for illegal gun possession on a Second Amendment basis.²²

How judicial attitudes have changed in the aftermath of the *Heller* decision! In the 2023 case of *United States v. Rahimi*, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals vacated the conviction of Zackey Rahimi for possessing a gun while under a domestic violence restraining order (DVRO).²³ The Court ruled that although Rahimi was a known drug dealer who was under a DVRO for threatening to kill his girlfriend and who was suspected of being involved in five shooting incidents in Texas in a two month period, Rahimi had a Second Amendment right to own a gun according to the Supreme Court's 2022 *Bruen* decision,²⁴ which was based in turn on the 2008 *Heller* decision. The Supreme Court reversed the Fifth Circuit's ruling in 2024, but the High Court went out of its way to make the point that while the federal law prohibiting someone under a DVRO from possessing a gun passed constitutional muster in Rahimi's case, it wouldn't necessarily be constitutional in every case;²⁵ and that once a DVRO expires, a person who has been under a DVRO must be allowed to get his gun back.²⁶

Justice Douglas's focus on "pistols" in the *Adams v. Williams* case also illustrates how gun ownership has changed in our country since 1972. The gun that Williams was convicted of possessing illegally was a revolver. Revolvers typically hold five to six rounds, take significant time and skill to reload, and either require the shooter to manually cock the hammer and rotate the cylinder (single action) or to exert a strong pull on the trigger in order to cock the hammer and rotate the cylinder (double action) between shots. Toward the end of the twentieth century, semi-automatic pistols began replacing revolvers as the handguns of choice in the United States. Semi-automatic handguns can hold magazines with up to 20 rounds; empty magazines can be quickly and easily replaced with full ones; light pulls of the trigger can fire several bullets per second; and new rounds are automatically fed into the firing chamber after each shot.

The term, "assault weapons," had not yet been coined in 1972. While there's still no uniform definition of an "assault weapon," the term is currently used most often to refer to AR-15 style semi-automatic rifles. Civilian ownership of these kinds of weapons was virtually unheard of in 1972, but now they're among the best-selling firearms in the United States.²⁷

Although AR-15 style rifles have become the murder weapons of choice for many mass shooters in the United States, handguns are still the weapons used in most gun-related deaths in our country, including in most homicides,²⁸ most suicides,²⁹ and most mass shootings.³⁰ There is overwhelming evidence that civilian handgun ownership is far more likely to harm than protect honest, law abiding people and their family members.³¹ Finally, it was the District of Columbia's partial handgun ban that the *Heller* decision overturned in 2008. For these reasons, Justice Douglas's comments about banning civilian ownership of handguns are just as relevant today, if not more so, as they were in 1972.

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We send out notices of our annual essay contest to over 1,000 high school educators across the country every year. I suspect that one of the reasons why we received fewer entries in 2024 than in 2023 was that due to the toxic political atmosphere that existed in our country in 2023, some high school educators feared retaliation if they brought the excerpt from our mission statement that we used as the 2024 prompt to the attention of their students.

The toxic political atmosphere in our country has only gotten worse over the past year, and I suspect that many high school educators will fear retaliation this year if they bring Justice Douglas's opinion in the *Adams* case to the attention of their students. For this reason, it's particularly important that we get help from our supporters in publicizing our 2025 contest. We'd greatly appreciate your help in bringing our 2025 contest to the attention of any high school students with whom you have contact.

We'll be awarding a total of at least \$15,000 in scholarships again this year, distributed among 12 contest winners, with \$3,000 for first place, \$2,500 for second, \$2,000 for third, \$1,000 for places four through ten, and \$250 for eleventh and twelfth place. We also reserve the option of giving out additional \$100 awards, as we have in most past years, if we receive more than 12 outstanding essays. Full contest details and the online entry form are posted on the [High School Essay Contest page](#) of our website along with a link to a downloadable essay contest flyer.

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, including this year's contest, we will have awarded over \$125,000 in scholarships during the eight year history of our contest. Contributions to the essay contest fund are tax deductible, and since the essay contest is run entirely with volunteer labor, 100% of contributions to the essay contest fund go directly to student awards. I hope that you'll read some of the winning contests in past years by clicking on the links below, that you'll be as inspired as we are by them, and that you'll consider [making a donation to the essay contest fund](#).

At the time of this writing, despite our best efforts to get other organizations to join us, Americans Against Gun Violence remains the only gun violence prevention organization in our entire country that openly advocates overturning the *Heller* decision and its progeny and adopting stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries, including laws that will drastically reduce the vast pool of privately owned guns in our country. The concluding paragraph in our mission statement reads as follows:

We are confident that one day, the United States will adopt stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in every other high income democratic country of the world. The only question is how many more innocent Americans, including innocent children and youth, will be killed and maimed by guns before that day arrives. It is our mission to make the day that we take definitive measures to stop our country's shameful epidemic of gun violence come sooner rather than later.

To be honest, after the November 2024 election, I have some doubt as to whether the U.S. electorate as a whole is capable of maintaining a democratic form of government, much less of stopping our country's shameful epidemic of gun violence. I know for certain, though, that our nation's children and youth deserve better from us.

In 2023, we brought Dr. Michael North of Scotland to be our keynote speaker at our

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annual dinner in Sacramento. Dr. North lost his five-year-old daughter, Sophie, in the 1996 Dunblane Primary School mass shooting in which 15 other five and six year-old children were killed and 13 other children and teachers were wounded by a man armed only with handguns that he legally owned.³² Britain already had a ban on civilian ownership of automatic and semi-automatic long guns, including so-called “assault rifles.” Following the Dunblane massacre, Dr. North helped lead the successful campaign to completely ban civilian handgun ownership in Britain. There hasn’t been another school shooting since the ban went into effect, and the rate of gun-related deaths in Britain (represented by the dot second closest to the origin in the graph above) is currently 1/70th the rate in the United States.

Dr. North, who prefers to be addressed by his nickname, “Mick,” stayed with my wife and me while he was in the United States, 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. A [video recording of his keynote address](#) and [the text of his speech](#) can be accessed 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. Mick stated:

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.

Mick had lost his wife, Barbara, to breast cancer the year before Sophie, their only child, was murdered. In his book, *DUNBLANE Never Forget*, Mick quotes four year-old Sophie as saying to him, “Don’t cry Daddy, it’ll be all right,” after her mother’s death.³³

I don’t know of anyone one who’s suffered a greater personal loss than Mick 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. I believe that Mick should serve as an example to all of us in the United States who love our country’s children more than its guns to have the fortitude to persevere despite all obstacles in working toward definitive measures to stop our country’s shameful epidemic of gun violence.

Sincerely,



Bill Durston, M.D.
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Americans Against Gun Violence Essay Contest Prompts 2018-2024

2018: *“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.”* (Statement by the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut in a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate in June of 1968)

2019: *“The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have ‘some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.’”* (Excerpt from the majority opinion authored by the late Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun in the 1980 case of *Lewis v. United States*, in which Blackman quoted from the Supreme Court’s 1939 *Miller* decision.)

2020: *“Firearm regulations, to include bans of handguns and assault weapons, are the most effective way to reduce firearm-related injuries.”* (Position statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics, published in the journal, *Pediatrics*, in April 2000)

2021: *“Describe the effect on American youth of the confluence of our country’s longstanding gun violence epidemic with the current Covid-19 pandemic and the threat of violent insurrection; and describe what role you believe the adoption of stringent gun control laws should play at this critical time in our nation’s history.”*

2022: *“If I were writing the Bill of Rights now, there wouldn’t be any such thing as the Second Amendment.... This has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud - I repeat the word ‘fraud’ - on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime.”* (Statement made by the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger during an interview on the PBS News Hour on December 16, 1991)

2023: *“Describe your thoughts about lockdown drills conducted in response to the threat of shootings on American school campuses.”*

2024: *“In creating constitutional obstacles, where none previously existed, to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries, the Supreme Court’s 2008 Heller decision and its progeny are literally death sentences for tens of thousands of Americans annually.”* (Excerpt from the 2024 mission statement of Americans Against Gun Violence)

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¹⁰ North.

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¹⁵ *Miller*.

¹⁶ Committee on Injury and Poison Prevention, “Firearm-Related Injuries Affecting the Pediatric Population,” *Pediatrics* 105, no. 4 (2000): 888–95.

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²³ *United States v. Rahimi*, 61 F. 4th 443 (Court of Appeals, 5th Circuit 2023).

²⁴ *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, Inc. et al v. Bruen, et al*, 142 S. Ct.

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²⁶ *U.S. v. Rahimi* at 1892.

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³³ Michael J. North, *Dunblane Never Forget* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2000), 61.