



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest

\$1,000 Scholarship Award Winner

(Author's name and High School withheld at author's request)

These Students Don't Practice Lockdown Drills Anymore

She was sixteen. She had a baby sister, loved chemistry, and dreamed of going to Harvard. She used to write poems in the margins of her notebook and could talk for hours about stars and galaxies. One morning, in the middle of fourth period, a boy walked into her classroom with a gun. In seconds, her future was stolen.

He was seven, just learning how to read chapter books, excited to show his teacher a drawing of his dog. He didn't even understand what a "mass shooting" was. But by the end of that school day, he had become one more victim.

If the students in these vignettes were like most other U.S. children and youth, they were required to practice lockdown drills to prepare for the event of a school shooting. But they don't practice lockdown drills anymore, because the drills didn't save them. Instead, they were added to the growing number of students killed in actual shooting shootings. But they weren't numbers before they were killed. They were real, live kids. They had favorite colors and inside jokes. They were loved.

Every time a school shooting happens, our country reacts the same way. Elected officials send their condolences; families, friends, and communities grieve; we all agree that the gun violence has gotten out of hand in our country and must stop; we hold moments of silence; and then we move on, without doing anything of substance to prevent the next shooting. Instead of preventing the next shooting, we create an illusion of safety by requiring students to continue to practice lockdown drills to prepare for the inevitable occurrence of the next shooting. And the next one. And the next one. And the next one.

Many people refer to gun violence in our country as an "epidemic." But that's technically incorrect. Dorland's Medical Dictionary defines "epidemic" as "A disease of high morbidity which is only occasionally present in a human community." In contrast, Dorland's defines an "endemic" as a disease that is "present in a community at all times." Gun violence isn't epidemic in our country. It's endemic. And that's terrifying.

In the 1972 case of *Adams v. Williams*, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote:

A powerful lobby dings 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 all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police.

When I first read the quote from Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, it caught me off guard. His statement that there's no reason why possession of handguns shouldn't be banned for everyone except police officers sounded extreme to me. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized how tired I am of living like this. If banning private ownership of not only handguns but also so-called "assault rifles" is what it takes to stop kids from getting killed in schools, then maybe it's not so extreme after all.

I used to think the Second Amendment gave every person the right to own a gun, no matter what. That's what we're always told. But the actual wording – "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State" - shows that it wasn't about individual ownership in the way we see it today. For most of American history, courts didn't read it that way either. It wasn't until the 2008 case *District of Columbia v. Heller* that a narrow 5-4 majority of Supreme Court justices first ruled that the Second Amendment confers an individual's right to own a firearm unrelated to service in a "well regulated Militia." That shift didn't happen by accident - it happened after decades of pressure from the gun lobby.

Justice Douglas warned about a "powerful lobby" shaping how we view gun ownership. And looking around today, it's clear he was right. That lobby has convinced Americans that any kind of regulation is an attack on freedom. But what about my freedom to go to school without fearing for my life? What about the freedom of students who never got to grow up – the students who don't do lockdown drills anymore?

I'm not a lawyer or a politician. I'm just a high school student who's tired of being scared. But there's one sentence in the *Heller* majority opinion that I largely agree with:

The Constitution was written to be understood by the voters; its words and phrases were used in their normal and ordinary as distinguished from technical meaning.

I think this sentence should include "soon to be" voters as well. We're the ones doing lockdown drills. We're the ones losing friends. And while we can't vote yet, we're still paying the price. But we can speak. We can organize. We can demand change. Because if our lives aren't worth protecting, then what is?