



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest

\$1,000 Scholarship Award Winner

Mario Fernandez

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Untitled

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas's 1972 opinion in *Adams v. Williams* challenges the interpretation of the Second Amendment that most Americans, including myself, have grown up with. His words call into question not only the constitutional foundation of widespread gun ownership but also the predominant influence of pro-gun lobbying on public opinion. Reading his opinion made me want to think more critically about what the Second Amendment was intended to preserve - and how that intention has evolved.

I was taught in school that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual the right to bear arms. But Justice Douglas's opinion, and the facts on the Americans Against Gun Violence website, made me understand that this interpretation is relatively recent. Throughout most of our history, the Second Amendment was tied to the idea of a "well-regulated Militia," not unrestricted individual gun ownership. The case of *District of Columbia v. Heller* in 2008 altered that interpretation dramatically, emphasizing individual rights and downplaying the initial context.

Most compelling for me was the contrast of the U.S. with other high-income countries. Other nations like Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia have far more stringent gun laws, far lower rates of private gun ownership, and far lower firearm death rates. The United States is exceptional not in that we have more violence in general, but that we make firearms so readily available. Justice Douglas's statement that "there is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police" might strike some Americans as extreme, but it is very much in conformity with the practice in countries where gun deaths are rare.

Gun violence has affected me personally. I've had friends who have had to live through lockdowns, and I've survived dozens of active shooter drills. There is always the lingering, background fear that the normal day at school will turn into a nightmare. This is not how anyone must live, least of all children.

I believe that youth can be key to changing the narrative. We are not yet part of the voting majority, but we do not have to be silent. We can raise our voices, organize, and urge lawmakers to prioritize public safety over political donations. Justice Douglas's words provided me with the realization that the Constitution is not absolute; it's meant to be of the people. And if the interpretation we have of it is costing lives, we must have the courage to reimagine it.

In the end, this essay contest didn't just get me to consider a single Supreme Court justice's opinion - it got me to want to be among a generation that refuses to normalize gun violence.