



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest Third Place Co-Winner

\$2,000 Scholarship Award

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Half A Truth – Whole Lives Lost

I remember the day of the Oakridge Mall shooting—December 20, 2021. I had been there just hours earlier—holding my 3-year-old sister’s hand, weaving through crowds, never imagining a place so familiar could become so dangerous. Then came the headlines. 15 shots fired. Panic. Chaos. The same floors we’d just walked were now a crime scene, a chilling reminder that any of those bullets could have hit us.

It happened in my home state of California, which claims to have some of the toughest gun laws in the United States. And yet, even here, where gun-related homicides are lower than the national average, the danger still feels inescapable. Compared to other high-income democracies, California’s laws are far more lax - and the consequences are deadly. Our gun homicide rate is almost 20 times higher than the average for those other countries and over 100 times higher than countries with the strictest gun control laws like Japan and the United Kingdom. So while my state may be considered “safer” by U.S. standards, the truth is, I still don’t feel safe at all.

Every year since 2020, guns have killed more than 40,000 Americans, and gunshot wounds have become the leading cause of death for children and teens. In fact, American high schoolers are 82 times more likely to be killed by firearms than their contemporaries in other wealthy democracies. Why? Because while other countries respond to gun-related tragedies with immediate reform, including gun bans that drastically reduce the pool of privately owned firearms, America does the opposite. We cling to the guns we already own and keep buying more—weapons that fuel suicide, domestic violence, and mass murder.

After the 1996 Port Arthur massacre that was committed with semi-automatic long guns, Australia promptly banned these kinds of weapons, bought back the ones

already in circulation, and destroyed them. Gun deaths have fallen by nearly half ever since. Following the 1996 Dunblane mass shooting committed with handguns at a primary school, the U.K banned handgun ownership and destroyed every privately owned handgun in the country. Britain has had zero school shootings since then and records fewer gun homicides in an entire year than the U.S sees in a single day. If the U.S. adopted similar bans with buybacks and destruction of banned guns already in circulation, we could save hundreds of thousands of lives over the next decade. But we show no signs of moving in that direction.

Why not? Because we've built gun policy around a half-truth. As Justice William O. Douglas warned 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..." The half-truth that the gun lobby "dins into the ears of our citizenry" is the second half of the amendment: "...the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." But the full truth is that the amendment begins with: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State..."

A "half-truth", by definition, is "a statement that mingles truth and falsehood with deliberate intent to deceive." And that's exactly what the gun lobby has done - "dinning" just half of the amendment into our ears, so effectively now, that most Americans and even a majority of current Supreme Court justices believe that the Second Amendment confers a right to private gun ownership unrelated to militia service. This deception has made guns so accessible that it fuels the very tragedies we desperately need to prevent.

But it wasn't always this way. For the first 217 years following the enactment of the Second Amendment, no U.S. gun control law was ever ruled to violate it. Federal courts, including the Supreme Court, explicitly rejected the notion of an individual right to firearms ownership outside the militia context. That all changed in 2008 with the case of *District of Columbia v. Heller*. In a narrow 5-4 decision, Supreme Court justices bowed to the pressure of the gun lobby and ruled that the District of Columbia's restrictive handgun licensing law violated the Second Amendment. But the law had been effective—within a decade of its passage in 1976, gun homicides in D.C. fell by 25% and gun suicides dropped by 23%.

Still, the *Heller* majority went beyond invalidating that single law. It ruled that, "The Second Amendment protects an individual right to possess a firearm unconnected with service in militia." Decades of relentless lobbying by the NRA and other pro-gun organizations didn't just sway the Court's opinion—the *Heller* majority allowed the gun lobby to reverse decades of precedent and effectively rewrite the Constitution. At the NRA's Virginia headquarters, the half-truth about the Second Amendment is engraved on the wall: "...the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed." The whole truth? Hidden with an ellipsis.

Justice Douglas didn't stop at exposing this distortion—he asserted that "there is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police." To

many Americans today, this sounds extreme. But it wasn't extreme back then. A 1959 Gallup poll showed that 60% of Americans supported banning handguns. And to my generation raised on lockdown drills and repeated mass shootings, such a ban doesn't sound extreme at all. It sounds like common sense.

The gun lobby has built its influence on half a truth, and whole lives are lost because of it. The distorted narrative they've built is preventing the enactment of laws that could save tens of thousands of American lives annually, including the lives of countless innocent children and youth. But we don't have to live this way. When a powerful lobby continues to spread this deadly half-truth, it is up to the rest of us, including my generation of youth, to join together and expose the full truth about the Second Amendment.

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