



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2026 National High School Essay Contest Second Place Winner

(Student's Name and High School Withheld at Student's Request)

Beyond Cowering Under Desks and Hiding in Corners

Cowering under a desk or crammed into a dark corner waiting for a ghost gunman, American children endure a traumatic coming-of-age ritual. In the wake of the 1996 Dunblane Primary School mass shooting, Dr. Michael North stated that when he and other grieving parents discussed what steps they should take to prevent another such tragedy, "The thought of armed guards and 'lockdown drills' never crossed our minds."¹ While America has responded to school shootings by turning schools into military zones, Great Britain eliminated the threat by banning civilian handguns. Lockdown drills place the physical and psychological burden of learning to avoid getting killed in a school shooting on the children themselves: a gross social contract violation. While practicing for shootings may be an unfortunate immediate reality, it is unacceptable as a permanent solution.

The looming threat of school killing defines an era of U.S. children marked by fear and resignation. Armed guards and regular lockdown drills turn schools into security theaters, signaling that children are acceptable collateral damage. This illusion of reducing harm has failed tragically: American gun homicide rates exceed Great Britain's 100 times over.² This harsh reality underscores that teaching children to hide from bullets is hopelessly inferior to enacting laws that ban the guns that fire them. Lockdown drills may offer short-term relief in a country defined by its vast pool of privately owned guns, but they act only as band-aids on the bullet wounds resulting from widespread civilian gun ownership. It is imperative, therefore, to identify barriers to adopting gun control laws like Britain's.

The answer lies in large part in debunking the prevalent myth that liberty includes easy access to lethal weapons. Gun manufacturers and the associated gun lobby promote this myth, turning outdated constitutional terminology into roadblocks to legal progress. They claim that the Supreme Court's 2008 *Heller* decision essentially

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codified into the U.S. Constitution a right to private gun ownership that our Founders inherited from Britain's 1689 English Declaration of Rights. In his keynote address, though, Dr. North noted that a British lawmaker who was actively involved in drafting Britain's handgun ban described this claim as "preposterous." The 1689 English Declaration of Rights Declaration did not confer a broad right to private gun ownership, and it was never mentioned during debates in Parliament concerning the handgun ban that was enacted after the Dunblane mass shooting.³ This constitutional barrier, therefore, is built on a "preposterous" myth, fabricated by corporations that value profits over lives and by individuals more obsessed with owning guns than with protecting children. Interpretations of the Constitution, however, can – and have – evolved over time when faced with public outcry. The responsibility to debunk the myths concerning the Second Amendment and the risks versus benefits of widespread private gun ownership now falls on the shoulders of American youth.

Our generation of youth must tear down the current state of paralysis by serving as an unwavering moral force. Half-measures cannot be tolerated, since tweaking a broken system only continues the problem. Dr. North and his colleagues, including the mothers who founded the grassroots Snowdrop Campaign (named for the only flower that was in bloom in Dunblane at the time of the massacre), refused to accept compromise. Instead, they demanded a complete ban on civilian handgun ownership when offered a partial ban by the British government.⁴

Dr. North and his colleagues realized that compromising would cost lives. Similarly, we must force U.S. lawmakers and the rest of our society to prioritize the safety of children over private firearm ownership. Pushing for absolute bans on civilian ownership of large classes of guns – including handguns and so-called "assault weapons" - comparable to the bans that Britain adopted will be resisted by many timid U.S. politicians, but gradualism has already proved fatal to many members our generation. Our generation must be the one that demands definitive measures to stop our country's epidemic of gun violence, for we are the ones paying the price.

Lockdown drills are not a solution to gun violence, but rather a result of inaction. Britain represents a shining example of a country that took bold steps to end an epidemic by eradicating the disease, not by forcing children to deal with the symptoms. The firm resolve of Dr. North and his British colleagues proved that they loved their children more than their guns.⁵ Until the United States of America demonstrates the same unconditional love, the blood of many more U.S. children will inevitably be spilled.

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Banning and destroying large classes of privately owned guns will be no easy undertaking, but it remains the only path to true freedom from the threat of school shootings and other forms of gun violence. Our generation of American youth must no longer accept being trained to cower under a desk or hide in a corner. Instead, we must stand up and demand adoption of the stringent gun control laws needed to stop our country's epidemic of gun violence.

¹ Michael North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," Americans Against Gun Violence Annual Meeting, Sacramento, California, October 21, 2023, 9, <https://aagunv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Dr.-Norths-Keynote-Address-w-Bills-intro.pdf>.

² North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 7.

³ North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 10.

⁴ North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 3–4.

⁵ North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 11.