



Americans Against Gun Violence  
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## **2026 National High School Essay Contest \$1,000 Winner**

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*Untitled*

Mrs. C handed out chocolate to the kids who were quiet enough as we sat on the floor in the cubby area. The principal knocked on the door and, in the same voice we heard during announcements every day, told us to unlock the doors. When someone did, we were subjected to a lecture about lockdown safety. After the lockdown kids asked questions. The answers felt like lies even when they were true: there's never been a mass shooting in Maine, drills are only done out of an abundance of caution, and we have nothing to worry about.

Last year there was a mass shooting in Maine. We were told it was one bad man, not a bad system, but how are we supposed to believe that when most mass shootings don't even make national headlines anymore. A week later my brother, who was six at the time, told me his plan to survive a school shooting. I was unwilling to feed him a line I knew was a lie, so I told him it was a good plan.

After every school shooting politicians tell us the same thing. It's not a gun problem; it's a mental health problem. I find this argument disingenuous for several reasons. First of all, a school shooting is by definition not possible without a gun. Secondly, they are not mutually exclusive. It is a mental health problem, but it is also a gun problem, and we should be addressing both parts of the issue. Guns can be regulated because they are concrete things. Mental health isn't. In addition, mental health takes time to improve. If someone can walk out of their second therapy session and buy a gun, it's not preventing mass shootings. Finally mental health is not being improved. People are perfectly happy to use mental health as an excuse to prevent gun regulation but have failed to address it in any meaningful way.

Untitled

Dr. North said, “The thought of having armed guards and ‘lockdown drills’ never crossed our minds.” The thought of a nationwide handgun ban never crossed my mind. I grew up watching families and survivors fight for bans on semiautomatics that we still don’t have. Since the year I was born many people have claimed the Second Amendment says anyone should be able to get any gun at any time. I was surprised the first time I read it because I see no way the actual amendment could be reasonably interpreted to mean that. It is undefendable that a right that doesn’t exist is so often considered more important than children’s lives.