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2024 Essay Contest \$1,000 Scholarship Award Winner

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Betrayal of Trust: The Devastating Toll of the Heller Ruling on the U.S. Public

When I first laid eyes on the graph on the Americans Against Gun Violence website displaying the stats of the number of annual gun-related deaths per year in the United States contrasted with the other democratic countries, I felt nothing but utter shock and disgust. Countries like Japan, Great Britain, Spain, and Italy have gun-related death rates of less than one per 100,000 population per year. Meanwhile, the U.S. has a rate of over 12 - a rate that is quite literally off the charts compared to our peers. As a so-called developed democratic nation, these numbers are unacceptable.

As one of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced countries, it makes zero sense to have this preventable bloodshed be a continuous problem. Topics like this make me think about how misconstrued the priorities of our nation truly are when it comes to gun violence. The solutions proposed by Americans Against Gun Violence seem entirely sensible to me. If countries like Great Britain can act swiftly to save lives by restricting access to firearms when mass shootings occur, why can't we? The evidence is right in front of us. Bans on civilian ownership of handguns and all automatic and semi-automatic rifles, including so-called "assault weapons," along with requirements for licensing of all gun owners and registration of all guns, can dramatically reduce the rate of deaths by firearms. Yet, in the 2008 *Heller* decision and subsequent related rulings, the United States Supreme Court has enacted constitutional barriers to what are clearly common-sense policies.

The *Heller* ruling, in which a narrow 5-4 majority of justices reversed over two centuries of prior legal precedent and instead endorsed the gun lobby's extremist interpretation of the Second Amendment, left me in shock. How is private gun ownership more important than the lives of our youth? The willingness of the court to interpret the "right to bear arms," described in the second half of the Amendment, as being unrelated to service in the "well regulated militia," described in the first half of the Amendment, even with the

overwhelming amount of evidence of the horror that widespread private gun ownership has caused, is alarming.

I am genuinely scared for the future, not only for myself but also for future generations. The threat of gun violence has become a constant, underlying fear that hinders our daily lives. In what world does it seem right that kindergarteners have to learn drills to prevent themselves from getting shot in the case of a school shooting? None. It's not right. This is not the way a civilized democratic society should function. We should be able to live without having to fear for our lives while in an academic environment or even in public places.

It's for these reasons that I fully support the gun control agenda outlined by Americans Against Gun Violence. By banning civilian ownership of all handguns and rapid-fire long guns, and by requiring strict licensing of gun owners and registration of their guns, our society can start to see an immediate decrease in gun violence. Actions like these are the ones that I believe are necessary to begin addressing this crisis. Obviously, it will require a massive number of gun owners to surrender their weapons to be destroyed, but if that's all it takes to save tens of thousands of lives annually, it's worth it. Truly, gun violence isn't a joke - it's a matter of life or death. The Supreme Court's *Heller* decision and its progeny have betrayed the trust of American youth like myself, practically putting a target on our backs and sentencing us to fear that at any time we may become the next victims of our country's epidemic of gun violence.