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## Gunned down: the teenager who dared to walk across his neighbour's prized lawn

- 66-year-old blasted boy twice with shotgun
- Killing highlights dilemma over firearms death toll

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**Julian Borger** Washington  
The Guardian, Wednesday March 22 2006

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**The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and clarifications column, Saturday March 25**

In the article below, we said that statistics showed nearly 1,000 children under 19 were shot dead every year in the United States. The figure is actually 1,830, which, taken together with the figures for children killed in suicides and firearms accidents, supports the claim that a child is killed by a gun every three hours in America.

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"I just killed a kid," Charles Martin told the emergency services operator. "I shot him with a goddamn 410 shotgun twice."

He had gunned down Larry Mugrage, his neighbours' 15-year-old son. The teenager's crime: walking across Mr Martin's lawn on his way home. Mr Martin opened fire from his house and then, according to the police, walked up to the wounded boy and pulled the trigger again at close range, killing him.

Even in a country with a long history of gun violence, the killing of Larry Mugrage in a quiet Cincinnati suburb on Monday stands out as particularly senseless. Mr Martin seems to have been liked well enough in the neat bungalow-lined streets of Union Township, but he appears to have been obsessed with the territorial integrity of his patchy lawn.

Neighbours said he would work himself into a rage if they mowed a foot over the invisible dividing line separating their gardens. "He was really warped on that stuff," one local resident said.

Even after killing a young boy, who was apparently running home to fetch a video game, Mr Martin, 66, seemed indignant. "I've been being harassed by him and his parents for five years. Today just blew it up," he told the operator. "Kid's just been giving me a bunch of shit, making the other kids harass me and my place, tearing things up."

"Okay, so what'd you do?" the police dispatcher asked.

"I shot him with a goddamn 410 shotgun twice."

"You shot him with a shotgun? Where is he?"

"He's laying in his yard," Mr Martin said in a tone of calm satisfaction, as if he had just disposed of a dangerous animal.

Larry Mugrage, a popular hard-working and clever schoolboy, added his name to a high and persistent death toll. A child is killed by a gun every three hours in America. According to the latest statistics, nearly 1,000 children under 19 are shot dead every year. Another 800 use guns to commit suicide, and more than 160 die in firearm accidents.

Forty per cent of American households own guns, but those guns are 22 times more likely to be involved in an accidental shooting, or 11 times more likely to be used in a suicide, than in self-defence. On average, more than 80 Americans are killed by gunfire every day.

But the US gun control debate has faded from the political scene. The Democrats, desperate to win support in conservative states where gun ownership rights are sacrosanct, have muted their enthusiasm for regulation. The party's last presidential candidate, John Kerry, made sure he was pictured shooting ducks at the height of the

campaign in Ohio, a swing state.

"The gun control debate on the national stage is non-existent for the time being," said Jens Ludwig, an expert on the issue at Georgetown University. "There are growing rumblings in Democratic circles that gun control is hurting them in the southern and western states they are trying to win."

Instead, the cause has been left largely to pressure groups which have been repeatedly bulldozed by the powerful National Rifle Association (NRA). A nationwide ban on assault weapons such as semi-automatic rifles expired in 2004, and other restrictions have been rolled back state by state.

Mr Martin had every right to his .410 (11mm) bore shotgun. Ohio does not require anyone buying any firearm to have a permit. Nor does the state require gunowners to have a licence, although some inner city municipalities have stricter rules. Most state legislatures considering gun legislation are seeking to relax the remaining controls. Last year, Florida introduced a law giving its citizens the right to "stand their ground" and open fire, even in a public place, if they feel threatened, and the gun lobby is trying to pass a bill in the state that would allow workers to bring guns into their workplace with or without their employer's consent.

Under pressure from the NRA, the Republican-run House of Representatives is investigating the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives for "abuse" of its power for cracking down on rural "gun shows" where controls on sales are generally looser.

Larry Mugrage will be mourned in Union Township as another victim of inexplicable rage, but the means used to kill him are unlikely to raise many eyebrows. Controls on shotgun ownership have never really been on the table in the debate, and that has been over for more than a year on the national stage. Mr Martin would have been within his constitutional rights to guard his lawn with an AK-47.

### **The 911 call**

Charles Martin called the emergency services operator after attacking Larry Mugrage. This is a transcript:

**Martin** I've been being harassed by him and his parents for five years. Today just blew it up. Kid's just been giving me a bunch of shit, making the other kids harass me and my

place, tearing things up.

**Operator** OK, so what'd you do?

**Martin** I shot him with a goddamn 410 shotgun twice.

**Operator** You shot him with a shotgun? Where is he?

**Martin** He's laying in his yard.

### **Guns in America**

32.6% of adults keep guns in or around their home , according to a 2002 survey. An estimated 40% own a gun

30,136 people were killed by firearms in the US in 2003; 730 of these were accidental

1.3m rifles were manufactured in the US in 2004; as well as an estimated 294,000 revolvers; 728,500 pistols; and 732,000 shotguns. Only 132,500 of these weapons were exported

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