

# THE BREAKING POINT

School shootings are only becoming more prevalent across America. How do we respond?

BY CARLY PHILPOTT,  
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Members of Denver East High School Students Demand Action march down 6th Street Mall away from the Colorado Capitol on April 29. East students hosted the protest to advocate for gun legislation, joined by other Students Demand Action chapters and community

# Shooting Threats Spark **Anxiety** in Many

BY IZZY KRAUSS  
Web & Opinions Editor

**A**lways facing the doors. Hyper-aware of all exits. Constant fear. These are all normal behaviors that STEM School Highlands Ranch shooting survivor Lucy Sarkissian faces everyday.

On May 7, 2019, two shooters entered STEM School, less than 15 miles from Creek, killing one person and injuring eight others. In the room across the hallway from the victim was 14-year-old Sarkissian.

The anxiety and fear surrounding shootings and safety continues to affect Sarkissian's everyday life, even four years later.

"Every single noise that happens is an evaluation of 'is that a gunshot? Is that a door slam? Is that a book getting dropped?'" Sarkissian said. "There's this constant evaluation that's become so normalized in my life."

According to the Gun Violence Archive, since the beginning of January 2023, there have been over 18 school shootings in the U.S., killing five people under the age of 18.

At Denver East High School, two administrators, Eric Sinclair and Jerald Mason, were injured in an on-campus shooting that left Sinclair in critical condition. Just three weeks prior, 16-year-old student Luis Garcia was killed in a drive-by shooting near campus.

Over a month later, many students still

struggle with intense anxiety every time they enter the school.

"Lots of kids are on high alert," East junior Bel Kales said. "Kids don't feel safe. Kids are really saddened. [It's hard to focus with] how unsafe I feel at school."

Since the Columbine shooting in 1999, fear and anxiety surrounding school shootings has grown significantly, and for many students the Sandy Hook shooting of 2012 made it clear that these tragedies were not isolated.

According to The Washington Post, over 349,000 students have experienced gun violence at school since Columbine. One could argue that the number of people impacted by gun violence is significantly higher because of the constant media attention it retains.

"I'm just sad that this is the culture you guys have to live in and that it's something that unfortunately [students are] becoming accustomed to."

*Dr. Lisa Geissler*

"As I grew up, I became more aware [of gun violence's presence] but it's always been kind of in the back of my mind," said junior Nandita Nair, Creek Students Demand Action president. "I do remember my first experience I had with [school shootings] was when [I was] the same age as the kids who were victims of Sandy Hook."

After Sandy Hook, many protocols were put in place to help prevent more incidents of gun violence within schools.

"[The] adults are doing their best to keep the school safe," Creek psychologist Dr. Lisa Geissler said.

The irony is that some of the precautions and protocols put in place, including lockdowns and SROs on campus, can cause more anxiety.

According to Chicago's Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, the presence of SROs generally increases students' fear and can negatively impact their perceptions of safety.

According to the National Conference of Legislators, in the 2015-2016 school year, about 42% of all public schools reported having an SRO or other school security personnel present on school grounds for at least one week during the school year. Even with increased security there has been little evidence to show that increased police presence makes the campuses any safer.

Following the short-term effects of gun violence on students, there are also many potential long term effects such as depression, PTSD, and substance abuse.

"[I'm still] not comfortable going to a high school," Sarkissian said. "It's more than just anxiety. I was officially diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder less than six months after the shooting."

Despite the anxiety and fear, these recurring events have caused gun violence in schools to become the new "normal."

"I'm just sad that this is the culture you guys have to live in and that it's something that unfortunately [students are] becoming accustomed to," Geissler said.

Students are learning to live in constant fear.

"It's not a problem of if it happens to us, it's when it happens to us," Nair said. "It's almost inevitable."



PHOTO BY QUINN RUDNICK

## Some Turn Fear Into **Activism**

BY CARLY PHILPOTT  
Editor-in-Chief

**F**or so many gun control advocates, the story is the same: one shooting, one gun death, one victim's face made them sure that they had to take action.

In 2018, after the Jan. 23 Marshall County High School shooting, teacher and mother Abbey Winter had this epiphany.

"I remember just being struck by one of the pictures of the victim, a 15-year-old, and at that time, my little girl was about a year and a half," Winter said. "I said to myself, 'I have x number of years before she is in high school or middle school. And I need to do something about this because...children are dying in their schools.'"

The victim that Winter recalls, Bailey Nicole Holt, was killed when a shooter opened fire in the open common areas at her school. Later, Holt's mom said Holt was on the phone with her as the shooting occurred, but was unable to talk, according to CBS News.

After that, Winter joined Colorado Moms Demand Action, a statewide chapter of the national organization of parents advocating for gun violence. She rose quickly to Colo-

rado Chapter Lead in summer of 2019. She's held the position since.

"Our strength, both statewide and nationally, is our advocacy with our legislators and through lawmaking," Winter said. "We've been very successful, not only in passing 'good' gun bills and stronger gun regulations, but also in stopping 'bad' gun bills."

By building relationships with legislators at all levels, lobbying, organizing rallies, and educating the public, Moms Demand Action has successfully pushed gun legislation across the nation. It's the perfect example of activism that comes from built-up pressure and fear: it was founded shortly after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting by a mother of five, Shannon Watts, who sought to connect Americans in preventing gun violence.

And for Winter, it's personal on multiple levels.

"My first year in the classroom was the year that Sandy Hook happened," she said. "I remember next year we were in a lockout, or secure perimeter. I had seven first graders just sobbing, because they had seen the coverage of Sandy Hook."

*Article continues on following page.*

**NEW REGULATIONS:** Denver mayoral candidate Mike Johnston speaks during a protest about gun violence on April 29. Johnston spoke about recent gun-control legislation signed into law by praising its historic standing. "I think they are historic successes that have been led by historic organizing efforts by moms and students who came out and demanded action," Johnston said. "They delivered the most significant package reform in 10 years. That's a huge accomplishment for the state."

### BY THE NUMBERS

**349,000**

**Students**, approximately, have experienced gun violence at school since Columbine, according to the Washington Post.

**377**

**Shootings** on school campuses since 1999, according to the Washington Post.

**279**

**Deaths** in school shootings between December 2012 and December 2022, according to BBC.

**647**

**Mass shootings** in 2022, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

**69**

**People** who have died in mass shootings nationwide since we began working on this article on March 23, 2023, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

**36**

**People injured or killed** in a mass shooting at a sixteenth birthday party in Dadeville, Alabama, on April 15, the largest shooting so far in 2023, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

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INFOGRAPHIC BY CARLY PHILPOTT

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PHOTO BY QUINN RUDNICK

Winter still works as a reading interventionist in Aurora Public Schools. Her six-year-old daughter, who Winter says knows more about the issue than most other kids her age due to her “proximity” to Winter’s work, has had experiences of her own in school, too.

“Their school went on accidental lockdown, someone just accidentally hit the button,” Winter said. “When I asked her about it later, she said, ‘My heart was beating really fast, but I was okay.’ Even that, which was an accident, anyone can hit an extra button, I was thinking, ‘we only have those buttons available because of this reality.’”

Winter, along with many other Moms Demand Action volunteers, has worked with students on gun activism.

This year, on March 3, Colorado Moms Demand Action’s Advocacy Day at the Colorado State Capitol fell on the same day as a walkout for Denver East High School students, who had just lost a student in a shooting outside their school.

At the time, Winter said she was impressed by how “passionate they are, and how much they want to get across the message that this is not normal.”

“Because we can make a difference,” she said. “And I know that they can and I know that we already have.”

Since its founding last semester, East Students Demand Action (SDA) has already seen two shootings on campus – one was of the student, Luis Garcia, in February, and the other was of two administrators inside the building on March 22. This school year,

they’ve walked out multiple times, met with legislators and candidates, and attended gun club and school board meetings, according to East SDA founding member sophomore Noah Shurz.

Shurz said SDA is important for “having a place where we can all talk about our fears and how we want to help tackle the problem.”

East SDA has spent multiple days in the Colorado State Capitol meeting with legislators outside chambers and offices.

“I think we’ve influenced some legislators to look at things in a different perspective,” East sophomore and SDA member Ali Sitiseri said.

Creek has its own chapter of SDA, founded by junior Nandita Nair and sophomores Kimaya Kini and Agnes Holena. They work to connect members with networks of advocacy, including other SDA chapters, and Kini testified at the Capitol for an extended version of the Red Flag Law.

“There were a lot of people from Moms Demand Action...who were there to support you,” Kini said. “But sometimes it’s hard to be around some of those Senators and Representatives who are just so against it. And even when you bring the perspective of ‘I’m scared to walk into school every day,’ the fact that they don’t care, it’s just really hard.”

**ART FOR CHANGE:** Creek Students Demand Action (SDA) members make signs during a morning meeting April 26 for a protest with other SDA chapters from the Denver area. The protest happened outside the Capitol on April 29.

In addition to expanding the Red Flag Law to allow healthcare providers, educators, mental health professionals, and district attorneys to confiscate guns when someone is indicating they may use the weapons to harm themselves or others, Kini mentioned banning assault weapons as an important step to preventing gun violence in schools. Winter strongly agreed.

“An assault-style weapon really puts the ‘mass’ in mass shooting,” Winter said. “It has a high capacity. It’s able to kill a lot of people in a short time. And so there’s no coincidence why it continues to show up in these mass shootings as the gun that is used.”

Colorado State Representative Elisabeth Epps and State Senator Rhonda Fields introduced a bill this session to ban assault weapons, but it was voted down by the House Judiciary Committee in the early hours of April 20.

“We know that this work is a marathon, not a sprint. While the vote didn’t result in the outcome we had hoped for, we raised awareness and built power,” Winter said via text. “Gun violence prevention has evidenced-based solutions in which [the assault weapons ban] is a piece. We will continue to work with [the] legislators and community to pass common sense laws that reduce gun violence and save lives.”

Regardless of the outcome, Kini still believes that activism is well worth it in the face of gun violence.

“We’re this new generation. A lot of times our legislators are older people, or they come from very old ideologies,” Kini said. “And that’s not what we need right now. We’re the ones being impacted. We’re the ones getting shot at, not the representatives sitting in their safe offices.”

“I need to do something about this because... children are dying in their schools.”

*Colorado Moms Demand Action Chapter Lead Abbey Winter*

# Colorado Legislators Advocate For Gun Control Policy

BY QUINN RUDNICK  
Managing & Sports Editor

Over the course of the Colorado legislative legal session, state lawmakers have passed a heavy package of gun control bills, most of which include regulations surrounding licensing, age restrictions, and waiting periods after purchasing. The state has treated these bills with extreme urgency, especially following a major upswing in mass shootings and gun violence across the country.

Bills that worked to increase regulations surrounding gun purchases, like Senate Bill 23-169, which raises the minimum age to purchase a firearm to 21 years, and Senate Bill 23-170, which extends extreme risk protection order availability, all came after a mass shooting at an LGBTQ+ club in mid-November and two shootings involving Denver East High School in late February and March.

These laws will work to align Colorado with other anti-gun violence strongholds, like California and Washington state. By preventing early access to guns and working to protect educators with extreme risk protection availability, Colorado lawmakers are attempting to set the state up to prevent mass shootings.

However, some of the most recent gun regulation proposals have been met with

significantly less urgency than bills like 169 and 170. House Bill 23-1230, a bill that would have banned the sale or transfer of assault weapons in Colorado, failed in the democratic-majority House judiciary committee on early April 20 after a 6-7 vote.

During the 14-hour hearing, 300 people testified either for or against the bill, aiming to communicate their support or concerns to the representatives that would vote on it afterwards.

“I’ve long said that Democrats weren’t serious about a statewide ban on assault weapons. If we fail, I was right. I want to be wrong,” 1230’s prime sponsor Democrat Representative Elisabeth Epps said during the opening of 1230’s hearing.

Despite Epps’ and other testimonials, there were many who did not support 1230. Austin Hein, director of political operations for the National Association for Gun Rights, argued that gun control bills would not protect civilians. “[A semiautomatic ban] will leave law-abiding citizens defenseless to the alarming rise of violent crime caused by the progressive criminal justice reform,” he said.

On April 28, Democratic Governor Jared Polis signed four gun control bills into law, two of which work to increase the security around gun purchasing. The other bills being signed extend extreme risk protection

to educators, and allow for firearm industries to be held liable for the misuse of their weapons.

Colorado has long been a fierce protector of gun violence victims, and following the recent increase in mass shootings, most lawmakers have made it clear that it is their goal to continue to work towards preventing gun violence, despite the issue being a divisive subject between them.

*By preventing early access to guns and working to protect educators with extreme risk protection availability, Colorado lawmakers are attempting to set the state up to prevent mass shootings.*

## RECENT COLORADO GUN LEGISLATION

### SB23-168

Senate bill 168 will make it easier for victims of gun violence to sue firearm manufacturers for misuse of their weapons.

### HB23-1219

House bill 1219 will establish a three-day waiting period for the delivery of a firearm following its purchase.

### SB23-170

Senate bill 170 extends an extreme risk protection order to licensed educators, providing teachers with a higher level of gun violence protection.

### SB23-169

Senate bill 169 will extend the minimum age to purchase a firearm in Colorado to twenty-one years of age.



PHOTO BY CARLY PHILPOTT

**LEFT:** Representative Bob Marshall (D-HD43) watches Representative Epps’ opening statement for HB-1230 on April 19. 1230 would have banned the sale and transfer of assault weapons in Colorado, but failed 6 - 7 on April 20.

INFOGRAPHIC BY QUINN RUDNICK  
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