THE BREAKING POINT

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

BY CARLY PHILPOTT, QUINN RUDNICK & IZZY KRAUSS
Editor-in-Chief, Managing & Sports Editor, Web Editor

Members of Denver East High School Students Demand Action march down 16th 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.
Analyses of gun violence in school shootings are common, but the stories are all normal behaviors that happen to students and school 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 long-term effects that are often not acknowledged. These include post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicide.

“Every single time a school shooting occurs, students are learning to live in a world where violence is a normal occurrence,” said junior Nandita Nair, Creek Students Demand Action president. “I do not remember my first experience with school shootings. I was a first grader at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I do remember my first experience being afraid when there was a threat of a school shooting. I was in sixth grade at the time, my little girl was about a year old. I was so scared for her safety. I was so scared for my own safety. And I needed to do something about this because…children are dying in our 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 prevention. She rose quickly to Colorado Chapter Lead in summer of 2019. She’s helped 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 lockdown, or in a secure perimeter. I had seven first graders just sobbing, because they had seen the coverage of Sandy Hook.”

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Shooting Threats Spark Anxiety in Many

BY IZZY KRAUSS
Web & Opinion Editor

Always 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 every day. 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 continue 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 Jared Macon, 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 receives.

“At first, I just didn’t believe it was happening,” said junior Bel Kales, East student. “Then I heard it on the news, and I was like, ‘Okay, this is happening.’

According to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, teacher and mother Abby Winter had this epiphany:

“I remember just being struck by one of the pictures of the victims, a 15-year-old, and at that time, my little girl was about a year and a half. I remember thinking, ‘My God, this could be me. This could be happening to me.’

“I was able to continuously work through my emotions, and I was able to continue to go to school every day.”

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,” said Dr. Lisa Geissler.

Some Turn Fear Into Activism

BY CARLY PHILPOTT
Editor-in-Chief

For 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 Abby 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 a 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.’

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BY THE NUMBERS

349,000 Students, approximately, have experienced gun violence at school since Columbine, according to the Washington Post.

279 Deaths in school shootings between December 2012 and December 2022, according to the Washington Post.

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 Davieville, Alabama, on April 15, the largest shooting so far in 2023, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

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.”
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.

“They 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, it’s not a sprint. While the vote didn’t result in a win, I was thinking, ‘we only have those buttons down, someone just accidentally hit the button’.”

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.

At the time, Winter said she was impressed by how “passionate they are, and how much they care, it’s just really hard.”

Winter says, “They don’t care, it’s just really hard. ”

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.

Colorado Moms Demand Action Chapter Lead
Abbey Winter

“My heart was beating really fast, but I was okay.’”

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

Art for Change: Creek Students Demand Action (SDA) members make signs during a morning meeting on April 26 for a protest with other SDA chapters from the Denver area. The protest happened outside the Capitol on April 25.

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.

“Heart attack issues, we only have those buttons down, someone just accidentally hit the button.”

But, Winter said, “It’s 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 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 it’s tempting to set the state up to 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.