

# High schoolers still like their guns, even after Parkland

**USA TODAY NETWORK** [Sean Rossman](#), USA TODAY Published 10:38 a.m. ET March 23, 2018 | Updated 10:52 a.m. ET March 23, 2018



(Photo: MICHAEL REYNOLDS, EPA-EFE)

They're young, fierce and — at least for the moment — the most prominent voices in America's debate over guns.

But not all members of "[Generation Columbine \(/story/news/2018/02/22/generation-columbine-has-never-known-world-without-school-shootings/361656002/\)](#)" cling to the rhetoric making household names out of some of their peers, those students calling for tighter gun control after the deadly Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla.

Many American high schoolers do not blame school shootings on guns and don't argue the answer is tighter restrictions on firearms. It's a view at odds with many of their classmates, yet born from the same safety

concerns.

"There's many things that go into a solution for this, and it's not guns," said Melanie Clark, an 18-year-old high school senior from Tallahassee. "We're definitely in the minority for believing that it's not guns."

As gun-control advocates their age gain popularity and others cast their generation as anti-firearm, pro-gun students feel at times overlooked. But polling suggests young people aren't overwhelmingly for gun control.



Family members embrace following the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Fla. (Photo: Wilfredo Lee, AP)

**Read more:** ['Generation Columbine' has never known a world without school shootings \(/story/news/2018/02/22/generation-columbine-has-never-known-world-without-school-shootings/361656002/\)](#)

**Read more:** [Poll: For the Columbine generation, gun violence is a defining fear \(/story/news/2018/03/22/poll-columbine-generation-gun-violence-defining-fear/441446002/\)](#)

A [USA TODAY/Ipsos poll \(/story/news/2018/03/22/poll-columbine-generation-gun-violence-defining-fear/441446002/\)](#) taken after the Parkland shooting found fewer than half of students 13 to 17 think tightening gun laws and background checks would prevent mass shootings. The Pew Research Center, in an [April 2017 poll \(http://www.people-press.org/2017/06/22/public-views-about-guns/#age\)](#), found 39% of people 18-29 said protecting gun rights is of chief importance. Compare that to 58% who favor gun control.

Pro-gun high school students told USA TODAY the school shooting problem is complex, but they maintain guns aren't the problem. They say more can be done as it relates to school security, mental health and background checks. Some argue those calling for gun control are uninformed about and unfamiliar with firearms.

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Marjory Stoneman junior Kyle Kashuv, a firm Second Amendment supporter, opposes banning assault weapons. School shootings, he said, are driven by "faulty communication and reporting of prior convictions," along with mental health issues.

School administrators, mental health counselors and others [received numerous warnings \(/story/news/nation-now/2018/02/18/missed-opportunities-alter-florida-shooters-path-records-show/349716002/\)](#) of the mental state and violent tendencies of gunman Nikolas Cruz in the months leading up to the attack on Marjory Stoneman Douglas, where 17 people were killed.

Similar to his classmates, Kashuv has been given airtime on national media to express his alternative take. He met with President Trump, Vice President Pence and members of Congress in the wake of the shooting. He also voices support for two Congressional measures which, among other intentions, provide grants for improved school safety training and improve how government agencies update records for gun background checks.



Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), center, speaks as (left to right) Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Patrick Petty, son of Ryan Petty, who lost his 14-year-old daughter Alaina Petty during the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Kyle Kashuv, a junior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, and Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) listen during a news conference in front of the U.S. Capitol on March 13, 2018. Sen. Hatch held a news conference to discuss the STOP School Violence Act. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images) ORG XMIT: 775140110 ORIG FILE ID: 931524572 (Photo: Alex Wong, Getty Images)

"Many, many dislike me, however I don't pay attention to criticism," Kashuv said in an email. "Parkland will be remembered as the beginning of the end of shootings."

**Read more:** [House passes school safety bill as students protest inaction on gun violence \(/story/news/politics/2018/03/14/congress-turns-school-safety-students-protest-inaction-gun-violence/422217002/\)](/story/news/politics/2018/03/14/congress-turns-school-safety-students-protest-inaction-gun-violence/422217002/)

**Read more:** [Brother of Florida mass killer says he is being unfairly held for trespassing \(/story/news/2018/03/22/brother-florida-mass-killer-says-he-being-unfairly-held-trespassing/450603002/\)](/story/news/2018/03/22/brother-florida-mass-killer-says-he-being-unfairly-held-trespassing/450603002/)



Melanie Clark, an 18-year-old high school senior from Tallahassee, held a small counter-demonstration at the Florida Capitol on Feb. 21. (Photo: Courtesy of Melanie Clark)

Among the defining moments for the Parkland students came a week after the shooting, when hundreds of high schoolers marched (</story/news/nation/2018/02/21/shame-you-florida-shooting-survivors-confront-lawmakers-capitol-tallahassee/358264002/>) on Florida's Capitol in Tallahassee to call on lawmakers to pass gun legislation. Clark and her boyfriend, Hunter Ventry, 17, also were there, holding a two-person counter-protest on the Capitol lawn. Their sign read, "Gun control. Because criminals follow laws, right?"

"The whole situation is horrible, and I think that something should be done," Ventry said, "but I don't think that what the majority is saying is what needs to be done. I think there are other actions that need to be taken before anything happens with guns."

The defense of the Second Amendment comes not without fear of another school shooting. In Pennsylvania, 15-year-old sophomore Kaitlyn Helms said the Parkland shooting "definitely" affected her and her classmates. She speaks of an "unspoken fear" among students, especially after someone made recent threats to her school.

**Read more:** [Obamas thank Parkland shooting survivors for 'resilience, resolve' in handwritten letter \(/story/news/nation/2018/03/22/obama-letter-thanks-parkland-shooting-survivors-resilience-resolve/448474002/\)](/story/news/nation/2018/03/22/obama-letter-thanks-parkland-shooting-survivors-resilience-resolve/448474002/)

**Read more:** [Marjory Stoneman Douglas students must use only clear backpacks after shooting \(/story/news/nation/2018/03/22/marjory-stoneman-douglas-clear-backpacks-florida-high-school-shooting/450510002/\)](/story/news/nation/2018/03/22/marjory-stoneman-douglas-clear-backpacks-florida-high-school-shooting/450510002/)

**Read more:** [Deputy suspended for sleeping on duty at site of Florida school mass murder \(/story/news/2018/03/20/deputy-suspended-after-sleeping-tasked-protecting-florida-high-school-where-mass-shooting-happened-w/443818002/\)](/story/news/2018/03/20/deputy-suspended-after-sleeping-tasked-protecting-florida-high-school-where-mass-shooting-happened-w/443818002/)

"There's no real way to avoid having a school shooting," Helms said. "People are going to find some type of way to do what they want, whether it's with guns or without them."

Helms, who participates in theater and is on her school's track and field team, lists the AR-15, the gun used in the Parkland shooting, as one of her favorites.

"It's not the gun's fault," she said. "The gun's not going to go off without someone's finger on the trigger."

Many of the students who spoke with USA TODAY oppose banning the AR-15, and most said teachers should be able to be armed if they choose, as long as they pass a background check.



Law enforcement agents line up as students head back to school at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Feb. 28, 2018, in Parkland, Fla. (Photo: Matias J. Ocner, AP.)

"I'm not a huge fan of arming teachers," said Tallahassee senior Justin Johnson, 18. But, "if teachers want to be armed, I think they should have the right to be armed."

Meredith Gibson, 14, an eighth-grader from Iowa, said schools would be safer with armed teachers. Helms argues an armed teacher could step in before law enforcement arrives.

Their arguments can sometimes mimic the talking points of older generations: "Guns don't kill people. People kill people," Helms said. But some pro-gun students take a sympathetic view of their classmates calling for gun control.

"While I do not necessarily agree with them, I do hear what they're saying, and I think that's just so amazing to see," Helms said. When asked why he didn't counter-protest the rally at the Florida Capitol, Johnson explained, "The rally was for people who suffered. I'm passionate about the subject, but I don't want to hurt anybody because they're going through a lot."

**March for Our Lives:** [They're the leaders we've been waiting for': Mass shooting survivors will join students at March for Our Lives](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/03/22/survivors-other-shootings-march-our-lives/404268002/)

**Read more:** [Can March For Our Lives rally avoid the fate of the Millions Mom March? \(story/news/2018/03/22/millions-moms-never-again-different-effect-march-our-lives/440961002/\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/03/22/millions-moms-never-again-different-effect-march-our-lives/440961002/)

It suggests a change in tone to current squabbling over guns. History shows political views differ greatly from generation to generation, said Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at the University of California-Riverside. Young people, he said, aren't as tied to a political party.

"They are not bought into or sort of socialized into hardened partisan categories that disrespect other young people," said Kahne, who studies the political engagement of young people. "They also don't want to be shot. They get that this was a huge tragedy, and I think that one of the things that has led people to be so distraught about the dysfunctionality of our politics has been the inability of sort of the adults in the room to come together and agree to talk in a productive way."

Even Kashuv, who uses Twitter to debate his stance, said the debate over guns has brought him closer to at least one of his classmates, Cameron Kasky, a leader of the #NeverAgain movement.

"Despite our political differences, @cameron\_kasky and I have become friends from our discourse, not enemies like one may have thought," Kashuv tweeted.

Kasky responded, referencing the Marjory Stoneman Douglas mascot: "Eagles are eagles are eagles are eagles."



The screenshot shows a Twitter thread. At the top, Kyle Kashuv (@KyleKashuv) tweets from March 17, 2018: "One thing politicians can learn from my school: Despite our political differences, @cameron\_kasky and I have become friends from our discourse, not enemies like one may have thought. Mutual #Respect #MSDStrong". Below this is a reply from Cameron Kasky (@cameron\_kasky) on the same day at 4:30 PM: "Eagles are eagles are eagles are eagles". At the bottom of the screenshot, it says "74 people are talking about this".

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