Thousands at rallies across the country demand gun control

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.26.18

Hundreds of thousands of teenagers and their supporters rallied in the nation's capital and cities across America on Saturday to press for gun control. The protesters were summoned to action by student survivors of the February 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The result was one of the biggest youth protests since the Vietnam era in the 1960s and 1970s.

"If you listen real close, you can hear the people in power shaking," David Hogg, a Parkland shooting survivor, said to the roaring crowd in Washington, D.C. He has emerged as one of the student leaders of the movement.

"We will get rid of these public servants who only care about the gun lobby," he warned.
Protesters chanted "Vote them out!" and held signs reading "We Are the Change," "No More Silence" and "Keep NRA Money Out of Politics." Hundreds of thousands of protesters packed Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House.

Marches Across Many U.S. Cities

Large rallies with crowds estimated in the tens of thousands in some cases also unfolded across the nation. People marched in cities including Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, Fort Worth, Texas and Minneapolis. They also marched in Parkland, Florida, the site of the February 14 school shooting that left 17 people dead.

Protesters denounced the National Rifle Association (NRA) and its allies. Students said that they are scared of getting shot in school and tired of inaction by grown-ups after one mass shooting after another.

They called for changes to U.S. gun laws. They want a ban on high-capacity magazines and assault-type rifles like the one used by the Florida killer. Other demands include more school security and raising the age to buy guns.

Activists Face Opposition From NRA, Government Inaction

President Donald Trump was in Florida for the weekend. A motorcade took him to his West Palm Beach golf club in the morning. As of early afternoon on Saturday, he had yet to weigh in on Twitter about the protests.

The NRA went silent on Twitter in the morning. This was in contrast to its reaction to the nationwide school walkouts against gun violence on March 14. At that time, it tweeted a photo of an assault rifle and the message "I'll control my own guns, thank you."

About 30 gun-rights supporters staged a counter-demonstration in front of FBI headquarters in Washington. Protesters stood quietly with signs such as "Armed Victims Live Longer." Other gun-control protests around the country were also met with small counter-demonstrations.

Organizers of the big rally in the nation’s capital hoped their protest would match in numbers and spirit last year’s Women’s March. The Women's March far exceeded predictions of 300,000 demonstrators.

"We will continue to fight for our dead friends," Delaney Tarr, another survivor of the Florida shooting, declared from the stage. The crowd roared with approval as she laid down the students' central demand: a ban on "weapons of war" for all but warriors.

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s 9-year-old granddaughter Yolanda Renee King gave a rousing speech at the Washington rally. She drew from the civil rights leader’s most famous words.
"I have a dream that enough is enough," she said. "That this should be a gun-free world. Period."

"Ballots Will Stop Bullets"

In Parkland, many police watched over the rally. More than 20,000 people filled a park near the school. Protesters chanted slogans such as "Enough is enough" and carried signs that read "Why do your guns matter more than our lives?" and "Our ballots will stop bullets."

Gun violence was also fresh for some in the Washington crowd. Ayanne Johnson is a student at Great Mills High in Maryland. She held a sign declaring, "I March for Jaelynn," honoring Jaelynn Willey, age 16, who died on March 22 two days after being shot by a classmate at the school. The classmate also died.

Since the bloodshed in Florida, students have tapped into a current of gun control sentiment that has been building for years. The movement still faces a powerful foe in the NRA and its supporters, though.

Organizers hope the passions of the crowds and the lineup of student speakers will create change in the country. They hope it will make people vote for politicians that support gun control in the elections this fall. This is why the students aren't only pushing for tighter gun laws. They are also working to register young people to vote.

Polls indicate public opinion in the U.S. may be shifting on the issue.

A new poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 69 percent of Americans think gun laws in the U.S. should be tightened. That is up from 61 percent in 2016, and 55 percent in 2013. Among gun owners, 54 percent now favor stricter gun laws.

At the same time, the poll found that nearly half of Americans do not expect elected officials to take action.