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Armed and academic: Perceptions of college students on concealed carry on campus policies

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ABSTRACT
Following the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, policymakers have sought ways to improve safety on college and university campuses nationwide. Among the more recent proposals is to permit concealed handgun licenses to carry on campus. To date, eight states have enacted legislation implementing this measure. A limited body of research considers the perceptions of students and other members of the campus community about these laws and their passage. The present study seeks to offer a new perspective, assessing student opinions about the recently passed legislation in Texas and whether they would support such a law in a state with strict gun control measures in place. The results indicate that while students collectively did not support concealed carry on their campus, males, Republicans, and gun owners were significantly more likely to express attitudes favorable of the law. Policy implications for its implementation, as well as limitations of the study, are considered.

On April 16, 2007, a student at Virginia Tech entered one of the campus’s residence halls and killed two students, one of whom was the dorm’s resident advisor. After a two-hour break, the gunman then entered the University’s engineering building and opened fire. By the end of his rampage, he had claimed the lives of 32 students and faculty members and injured nearly 20 others. He then committed suicide as law enforcement entered the scene (Virginia Tech Review Panel [VTRP], 2007).

Following the Virginia Tech shooting, students and faculty across the country were at a heightened fear of similar attacks occurring on their campuses (Fallahi, Austad, Fallon, & Leishman, 2009; Kaminski, Koons-Witt, Thompson, & Weiss, 2010; see also Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014; Fox & Savage, 2009; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015). These perceptions were compounded further, albeit to a lesser extent, by a shooting at Northern Illinois University just 10 months later that claimed the lives of 5 students and left more than 20 injured (Kaminski et al., 2010; Northern Illinois University, 2010). Despite that these events are statistically rare (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016), students continued to express not only a heightened fear but a greater perceived risk that they could fall victim to a mass shooting at their school (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015; see also Fallahi et al., 2009; Kaminski et al., 2010), due in part to the media coverage events like Virginia Tech garnered (Elsass et al., 2014).

To assuage these fears, campus administrators and politicians alike have sought ways to improve campus safety. One such proposal was to permit persons with concealed handgun licenses to carry their firearms on campus. In fact, 19 states in 2013 and another 14 states in 2014 introduced legislation designed to permit concealed carrying on campus, though only a fraction of the laws were enacted (Hultin, 2017). Conversely, five states sought to legally prohibit concealed carry on
campus; their efforts, however, were unsuccessful (Hultin, 2017). In total, 10 states currently permit individuals with concealed handgun licenses (CHLs) to carry on campus (Hultin, 2017).

Though the decision about whether a state, and by extension, a particular college or university, permits concealed carry on campus ultimately falls to the legislature, it is prudent to consider the perceptions of students as they are the largest group of shareholders potentially impacted (see also Thompson et al., 2013). Accordingly, the present study seeks to add to the limited body of research by considering how college students view such policies, particularly in light of one of the most recent states to pass a concealed carry on campus law—Texas. While previous studies (e.g., Cavanaugh, Bouffard, Wells, & Nobles, 2012; Payne & Riedel, 2002; Thompson et al., 2013) also have examined this issue, each have called for additional consideration as to the generalizability of their findings. Further, these studies have taken place in various regions of the country but have failed to consider the Northeast, an area that both has lower levels of gun ownership compared to other states and the nation at large (Kalesan, Villarreal, Keyes, & Galea, 2016) and greater collective support for control measures (see, generally, Wolpert & Gimpel, 1998). Accordingly, the present study seeks to fill these gaps by not only considering college students’ attitudes about concealed carry on campus but doing so in a more politically restrictive climate.

Review of the literature

Campus safety and concealed carry post-Virginia Tech

Following the shooting at Virginia Tech, university administrators, task forces, and politicians alike grappled with how to improve campus safety to ease public fears and prevent future attacks (Fox & Savage, 2009). A number of different policies and strategies were introduced aimed at achieving these ends, particularly after the release of the VTRP’s (2007) report. Some of these responses, such as the use of emergency notification systems (see, generally, Elsass, McKenna, & Schildkraut, 2016; Schildkraut, McKenna, & Elsass, 2015) and threat assessment teams (Deisinger, Randazzo, O’Neill, & Savage, 2008; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011), emerged directly out of systems failures identified as being present on the day of the shooting (VTRP, 2007; see also Fox & Savage, 2009). Other responses, such as the use of metal detectors and lockdown procedures, also were introduced as ways to increase security on campuses (Nedzel, 2014; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). As Fox and Savage (2009) noted, however, these tactics present challenges for their implementation for colleges and universities due to the campus’ specific environmental design, despite that such tools appear effective in countering threats to primary and secondary schools (see also Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011).

Some policymakers have taken their response to Virginia Tech a step further by suggesting that firearms owners in possession of concealed handgun licensees be permitted to carry on campus (Birnbaum, 2013; Fennell, 2009; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). Proponents of such legislation suggest that enabling concealed handgun licensees to carry on campus improves overall security and enables those individuals to protect themselves and others (Birnbaum, 2013; Fennell, 2009; Harnisch, 2008; Lipka, 2008; Wiseman, 2012). In fact, in one study of more than 10,000 students on 119 campuses nationwide, more than 4% of respondents identified as having a gun at college, regardless of laws explicitly banning the weapons, with protection listed as the main reason for being armed (Miller, Hemenway, & Wechsler, 2002). Furthermore, individuals advocating for these laws argue that potential perpetrators would be deterred from committing a violent crime, such as a mass shooting, if they knew that armed citizens were present (Bouffard, Nobles, Wells, & Cavanaugh, 2012a; Birnbaum, 2013; Harnisch, 2008).

The legal foundations for these policies trace back to the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution, as well as the Supreme Court’s rulings in D.C. v. Heller (2008) and McDonald v. Chicago (2010) that expanded that amendment’s protections to individual firearm holders (Birnbaum, 2013; Nedzel, 2014). In D.C. v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570 (2008), the Court held that the Second Amendment protected individuals’ rights to possess firearms for self-defense purposes,
particularly in areas such as the home. The decision later was made applicable to the states under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment in the case of McDonald v. Chicago, 561 U.S. 742 (2010). In their respective decisions, however, the Court did not specifically address whether guns should be permitted on school campuses, instead deferring to the states to decide (Birnbaum, 2013; Nedzel, 2014). Moreover, both Heller and McDonald addressed issues of gun ownership. While it is likely that these cases would serve as a precedent if arguments related specifically to gun carrying were heard, no such issue has yet to be considered by the Court.

Conversely, opponents of concealed carry on campus laws suggest that these policies are counterproductive to the overall academic purpose of collegiate learning (Birnbaum, 2013; Miller, 2011; see also Bouffard, Nobles, Wells, & Cavanaugh, 2012a; Fox & Savage, 2009). From the standpoint of academic freedom, the belief exists that the free exchange of ideas that collegiate institutions are known for could be hampered by the presence of (or the suspicion of the presence of) a firearm, particularly when intellectual disagreements may arise (Birnbaum, 2013; Miller, 2011). Similarly, academic autonomy—the expectation that policies related to both learning and security should fall to the institutions themselves—also is a consideration (Birnbaum, 2013; Harnisch, 2008; Miller, 2011). Aside from the potential policymakers lacking training in campus security matters, the institution still retains legal responsibility for potential implications stemming from the protocol, making it less than ideal to have such decision-making capacities beyond its direct reach (Birnbaum, 2013).

From an opportunity standpoint, having guns on campus can place students in more danger since they can lead to accidents, as well as students who suffer from suicidal tendencies harming themselves (Harnisch, 2008; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). Concern also has been raised as to whether students are mature enough to handle the stressors of college life and whether failure to do so could result in increased firearm violence on campus (Fennell, 2009; Harnisch, 2008), though statistical evidence supporting this notion has yet to be found—colleges and universities remain extremely safe (Birnbaum, 2013; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). It is potentially for these reasons that many college administrators, students, law enforcement personnel, and other stakeholders express serious reservations about allowing concealed carrying of weapons on campuses nationwide (Fallahia et al., 2009; Harnisch, 2008; Hemenway, Azrael, & Miller, 2001; LaPoint, 2010; Thompson et al., 2013).

Finally, there are practical considerations that have been raised regarding concealed carry on campus policies, particularly in the event of a serious violent incident on campus. For responding law enforcement officers or another person with a concealed handgun, individuals who brandish their weapon may appear to be the shooter when, in reality, they are not (Fennell, 2009; Harnisch, 2008). This mistaken identity may lead to that individual getting shot rather than the real gunman, thereby increasing the collateral damage of the event (Fennell, 2009; Harnisch, 2008; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). In fact, in one study, individuals carrying weapons were estimated to be nearly 4.5 times as likely to be shot in an attack compared to those persons who were unarmed (Branas, Richmond, Culhane, Ten Have, & Wiebe, 2009). Additionally, first responders may be prevented from reaching injured victims as law enforcement attempts to determine who is the actual shooter (Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). Further, insufficient training for concealed handgun permit holders related to firing guns in high stress situations, as compared to the level of preparation law enforcement officers receive, also could increase the lethality of the event (Harnisch, 2008; Nedzel, 2014; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). In one study, Thompson and colleagues (2013) found that students also shared these same concerns and viewed them as potential disadvantages for allowing concealed weapons to be carried on campus.

In the year following the Virginia Tech shooting, most public colleges and universities nationwide banned concealed carry on campus, with 26 states extending this prohibition so far as individuals with concealed handgun permits (Harnisch, 2008; LaPoint, 2010). Only one state—Utah—prohibited institutions of higher education from banning firearms on their campuses (Harnisch, 2008), though specific provisions for gun safety were in place in the state (see, for example, Lipka, 2008). Since that time, however, a number of states have moved to enact legislation that permits concealed carry on campus. While many attempts failed, nine enacted laws requiring that public institutions allow
concealed handgun licensees to carry on campus (Hultin, 2017), with the state of Texas being one of the most recent—their law went into effect on August 1, 2016.

**Perceptions of concealed carry on campus legislation**

Hemenway and colleagues (2001) have found that among the general population, 94% of individuals do not believe that guns should be permitted on college campuses. More recently, studies have been conducted specifically examining college students’ perceptions and attitudes towards campus concealed carry laws (Bouffard, Nobles, & Wells, 2012b; Cavanaugh et al., 2012; Jang, Dierenfeldt, & Lee, 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). One study seriously called into question the effectiveness of these laws as they relate to these perceptions of safety by finding that a strong majority (79%) of students from 15 public colleges in the Midwest would not feel any more protected if they were granted the ability to carry firearms on their campuses (Thompson et al., 2013). The same proportion of students also expressed that they would not possess firearms on campus if permitted (Thompson et al., 2013).

Aside from failing to improve perceived safety, these laws also were viewed negatively by college students (Jang et al., 2014). Surveying undergraduate students at Missouri Western State University, Jang and colleagues (2014) discovered that more students (49.9%) were opposed to policies permitting concealed carry permit holders to bring their weapons to school than there were in support for such measures (32.4%).

Individual level characteristics of students, when analyzed, also provide insight into attitudes favorable or unfavorable of concealed carry on campus policies. Males, for example, were more likely to view such policies favorably and to see greater advantages in their implementation than females (Jang et al., 2014; Patten, Thomas, & Wada, 2013; Thompson et al., 2013; see also Payne & Riedel, 2002). One of the strongest predictors for favorable outlooks towards these laws was political affiliation; students who identified with the Republican Party or as conservative tended to be more accepting of these policies (Bouffard et al., 2012a; Jang et al., 2014; Patten et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2013). This is not surprising, given the fact that gun-rights advocates commonly are linked with the Republican Party (Jang et al., 2014). Thompson et al. (2013) went even further in their research and found that identifying with a party other than Democrat was significantly correlated with believing there were benefits to these statutes. Aside from political affiliation, familiarity with firearms also was one of the variables most strongly correlated with approval of laws enabling students to carry handguns on campuses (Jang et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). When a student’s family and friends were well-acquainted with firearms as a result of owning or carrying their own guns, that individual was more likely to favor campus concealed carry laws (Jang et al., 2014).

Studies also have considered the role that prior victimization plays on college students’ perceptions of these laws (Bouffard et al., 2012a; Thompson et al., 2013). Students who had been victimized on campus were both more likely to carry on campus if permitted to do so and to view these policies favorably (Bouffard et al., 2012a; Thompson et al., 2013). Interestingly, even students’ majors have been found to be significantly related to students’ perceptions of campus concealed carry policies as well (Bouffard et al., 2012b; Payne & Riedel, 2002). Utilizing a sample of students drawn from colleges in both Washington and Texas, Bouffard and colleagues (2012b) found that those majoring in criminal justice programs were more willing to carry firearms on campus than others if a campus concealed carry policy were implemented in their state.

Overall, there are significant differences in perceptions of concealed carry on campus laws when individual level characteristics of college students are considered (Bouffard et al., 2012b; Cavanaugh et al., 2012; Jang et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). To gain a broader understanding of how these policies are viewed by various college students, studies need to examine the perceptions of these policies of those most affected by such legislation—the students themselves. These perceptions not only should be examined in states in which they are likely to be passed, but also in areas that are predisposed to not even consider such legislation.
Methodology

The present study was guided by two important research questions. First, are people who reside in a state with stricter gun control policies more or less likely to support concealed carry on campus? Second, what factors influence students’ perceptions about concealed carry on campus laws? While the latter question has been the target of previous research (e.g., Cavanaugh et al., 2012; Jang et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013), continued examination is warranted, particularly as this body of research is limited in scope yet the topic of concealed carry on campus draws considerable attention from politicians, pundits, and the public alike. Cavanaugh and colleagues (2012), for example, cautioned that their specific findings “may not represent other universities in these states [Texas and Washington] or across the country” (p. 2246, emphasis added). In response, the researchers called for replication of their study in other regions to determine the scope of the findings’ generalizability (Cavanaugh et al., 2012). In addition to Texas and Washington, this limited body of research also has examined the perceptions of students in the South (Payne & Riedel, 2002) and Midwest (Thompson et al., 2013), yet such calls for validation of the findings persist.

Further, in line with the first research question, student’s perceptions of these policies in politically restrictive climates like the Northeast—which tends to be more favorable of measures like gun control—has yet to be examined. Accordingly, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining students’ perceptions of such legislation in New York. Although regions from prior studies have similar rates of gun ownership to the national average, New York has a considerably lower proportion of its population—just 10.2% as compared to around 30% - that own firearms (Kalesan et al., 2016). Further, the state currently is under one of the most comprehensive gun control packages nationwide: the S.A.F.E. Act. Passed after the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, the S.A.F.E. Act:

> Stops criminals and the dangerously mentally ill from buying a gun by requiring universal background checks on gun purchases, increases penalties for people who use illegal guns, mandates life in prison without parole for anyone who murders a first responder, and imposes the toughest assault weapons ban in the country. (NYSAFE Act, n.d.)

Thus, these factors have the potential to impact respondents’ perceptions of concealed carry on campus policies differently based on the state’s contextual differences from those in the prior studies.

Data collection

In order to answer the research question, data were collected from undergraduate students at a midsize, public university in New York. Though the University is located in a more rural city of approximately 18,000 residents, it draws a student body from all across the state, including New York City, Long Island, and the central (Syracuse) and western (Buffalo) regions. Collectively, 94% of the student body is comprised of state residents, with only 6% matriculating from out of state or international locations. Further, approximately 74% of students report their ethnicity as white and 51% identify as female. The University also has a heavy liberal arts focus, accounting for 41% of majors in the most recent freshman class.

Upon receiving approval from the University’s Institutional Review Board, web-based surveys were distributed on August 1, 2017 via e-mail invitation by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment to a random sample of 1,000 students. Reminders were sent 10 and 20 days after the initial invitation was disseminated, as previous research has found that follow-up contact has a positive effect on response rates (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009; Sauermann & Roach, 2013). The survey was open for 30 days, and a total of 334 surveys were completed. This represents a response rate of 33.4%, which is in line with previous research that has found that the average response rate for email surveys ranges between 33% and 40% (see Cook et al., 2000; Shih & Fan, 2009).
Dependent measures

The questionnaire began with a brief statement about the concealed carry on campus legislation that passed in Texas at the start of the semester, which read as follows:

On June 1, 2015, Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed Senate Bill 11 (S.B. 11), also known as the “campus carry” law, into legislation. S.B. 11 provides that licensed holders may carry a loaded, concealed handgun throughout public university campuses, beginning August 1, 2016. Each college and university may prohibit concealed weapons in certain “sensitive areas,” but are required to post notices once the sensitive area designation has been approved by the Board of Regents. Examples of sensitive areas are establishments where 51% or more of income is derived from the sale of alcohol, during K-12 sponsored activities, or at polling places when voting is in progress. Colleges and universities are required to display the regulations on the campus’ website and in correspondence with faculty, staff, and students. Private institutions may continue to prohibit concealed handguns on campus.

S.B. 11 differs from the Open Cary Law (House Bill 910) currently in effect in the state, which allows individuals with concealed handgun licenses to openly carry a holstered handgun in public. Open carry remains prohibited on college and university campuses.

In addition to Texas, eight other states—Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Oregon, Utah, and Wisconsin—also permit concealed carry on campus.

Two specific questions followed the aforementioned statement assessing respondents’ support for the passage of similar legislation in their state and whether they would still attend the University if such a regulation went into effect. Response categories were structured in Likert-type, multiple-choice formats, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) for each question.

Two additional questions were included in the panel that followed the statement summarizing the Texas law. These questions asked respondents to rate their belief that people would be more capable of protecting (1) themselves and (2) others if they were allowed to carry their weapons (guns) on campus. Response categories also followed the same Likert structure as the previous questions. An additive scale then was created using the responses to the two questions assessing the protection value of firearms on campus, resulting in a Cronbach’s alpha of .963. Responses ranged from 2 to 10, with a mean response value of 5.93. Interestingly, the mean of the scale suggests that students are generally split about the potential protection value of having guns on campus.

Respondents also were asked three questions assessing their comfort level with guns on campus. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate their comfort level on a scale of 0 (not at all comfortable) to 10 (completely comfortable) of attending classes, living in on-campus housing, and participating in on-campus activities with individuals who were carrying a concealed weapon. An additive scale then was created assessing their overall comfort level with guns on campus, producing a Cronbach’s alpha of .976. After scaling, responses ranged from 0 to 30, with a mean score of 10.79, indicating a lower comfort level with guns on campus.

Next, respondents were asked a series of questions pertaining to safety policies: if students should be allowed to store their firearms in their dorm rooms if the guns were locked in a safe; allowing professors to store their weapons in their offices; requiring copies of CHL licenses to be on file for both students and faculty/staff; and requiring the university to implement safeguards to prevent unlicensed gun owners from bringing such weapons on campus. Responses again were structured in a Likert-type format, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. An additive scale, resulting in a Cronbach’s alpha of .754, then was created for these safety policies. Combined responses ranged from 6 to 30, with a mean score of 22.7, suggesting that students generally support safety-related policies if guns were to be allowed on campus.

Finally, once the individual scales were created, the measures were collapsed further according to the initial response categories relative to the individual survey questions. Since these questions originally were measured on Likert scales, the newly constructed variables were collapsed similarly. For safety policies, for example, scaled responses between 6 and 10 were recoded to a 1, representing strongly disagree, 11–15 were recoded to disagree (2), 16–20 were recoded to neither agree nor disagree (3), 21–25 were recoded to agree (4), and 26–30 were recoded to strongly agree (5). This process was repeated for the
protection value measure relative to the number of questions (two). Comfort, which first was measured across three individual questions continuously from 0 to 10, also was recoded into an additive scale. This scale contained three categories: low (0–10), moderate (11–20), and high (21–30) levels of comfort.

**Independent variables**

In addition to items pertaining to the Texas bill, comfort with guns on campus, and safety policies, respondents also were asked a series of demographic questions that were expected to impact perceptions of the legislation. Table 1 presents an overview of the demographics of the sample. Standard measures, such as age, race, and sex, were included as control variables. Age was measured continuously, with responses ranging from 17 to 56, with a mean age of just under 20 years (\(\bar{x} = 19.92\)). Due to the smaller proportion (15.9%) of respondents who identified as African American, Asian, biracial/multiracial, or being from other races, race was dichotomized as White and non-White (reference group). Sex also was dichotomized, with females serving as the reference group as males typically have a higher rate of gun ownership (Jones, 2013; Lott, 2010; Smith, 2001). These demographic characteristics of the sample largely mirror the broader student population at the University.

Several additional control variables also were included in the analysis. First, respondents were asked which political party they most identified with. Responses then were dichotomized into Republican and non-Republican (reference group), as the former also is more likely to own a firearm as compared to their more liberal counterparts (Lott, 2010; McCarthy, 2014). Next, respondents were asked whether they personally owned a firearm as well as if they had ever been the victim of a violent crime. Those individuals who did not own a gun (85.3%) or had not been the victim of such crime (89.5%) served as the reference groups for their respective measures. Finally, respondents were asked whether they lived on campus, as laws regarding concealed carry at universities also include provisions for firearms being kept in such housing.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–20</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–23</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 or older</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial/Multiracial</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political party affiliation</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun owner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>85.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime victim</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives in On-Campus Housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The majority of respondents in the study reported that they did not support the passage of concealed carry on campus legislation in New York State (see Table 2). More specifically, nearly 48% of these individuals expressed opposition to such a law. Surprisingly, this level of disapproval is considerably lower than has been found in previous research—Patten and colleagues (2013) and Thompson and associates (2013) found that 73% and 79% of their respondents, respectively, did not support concealed carry on their campuses. Conversely, however, just under 31% of respondents supported the legislation. The remaining 21% did not express attitudes that were either favorable or disagreeable to such a law.

Despite reservations about allowing for concealed carry on campus, respondents did not express that this would change their attendance at the University. In fact, over 56% of students surveyed said that they would still attend their school if such legislation was passed. Less than one in four (24.6%) disagreed with such a statement. Just under 19% of respondents expressed that they neither agreed nor disagreed with such an idea.

Multivariate analysis

While descriptive analyses can be helpful for understanding how support for concealed carry on campus policies is distributed, more complex examination is needed to determine which specific factors, if any, are influencing such perceptions. Accordingly, multinomial logistic regression was used to estimate models for the five separate dependent measures in the study. This analytic approach assesses the dependent variable by each category: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree (reference group) or, in the case of the comfort with guns on campus measure, low (reference group), moderate, and high. This approach is appropriate because the estimated effect of the independent variable can differ across categories of the dependent measure (Hosmer, Lemeshow, & Sturdivant, 2013). Multinomial regression provides change in perception for each level of agreement in the dependent variable.

Table 3 presents the results of the regression models for the direct measures of perceived support for concealed carry on campus legislation. Table 4 presents the indirect estimates pertaining to comfort with guns on campus, Table 5 presents the estimates related to the perceived protection value of having them present, and Table 6 presents estimates pertaining to the potential safety protocols should such a policy be enacted.

In first examining Table 3, the results indicate that males are significantly more likely to support the passage of concealed carry on campus legislation in their state, rather than oppose such a measure, as compared to females (agree: $OR = 2.622, p < .05$; strongly agree: $OR = 2.662, p < .05$). Similarly, both Republicans (agree: $OR = 3.071, p < .05$; strongly agree: $OR = 18.511, p < .001$) and gun owners (agree: $OR = 11.521, p < .01$; strongly agree: $OR = 28.844, p < .001$) also indicated greater odds of more favorable, rather than adverse, opinions about the passage of a similar bill to the Texas policy than their non-Republican and non-gun-owning counterparts. These same groups—males ($OR = 5.454, p < .001$), Republicans ($OR = 4.705, p < .01$), and gun owners ($OR = 8.411, p < .05$)—also had greater odds to
strongly agree, rather than expressing strong disagreement, that they would continue their attendance at the University if concealed carry was permitted on campus as compared to females, non-Republicans, and non-gun owners.

Consideration also was given to how respondents perceived the protection value of guns, their comfort with firearms on campus, and support for the requirement of safety protocols if the

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### Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression results for support of concealed carry on campus legislation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student perceptions</th>
<th>Strongly disagreea</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would support the passage of legislation similar to S.B. 11 in my state.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.017</td>
<td>.882</td>
<td>1.024</td>
<td>1.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.132</td>
<td>2.083*</td>
<td>2.622*</td>
<td>2.662*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.688*</td>
<td>.795</td>
<td>.860</td>
<td>1.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.312</td>
<td>1.710</td>
<td>3.071*</td>
<td>18.511***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun owner</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.107</td>
<td>1.024</td>
<td>1.331</td>
<td>1.909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives on campus</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.971</td>
<td>.698</td>
<td>.650</td>
<td>.597</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aStrongly disagree serves as the reference (comparison) category.
*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

### Table 4. Multinomial logistic regression results for protection value for guns on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student perceptions</th>
<th>Strongly disagreea</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.246</td>
<td>1.205</td>
<td>1.132</td>
<td>1.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.091</td>
<td>1.456</td>
<td>2.577*</td>
<td>5.454***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.836</td>
<td>.819</td>
<td>.575**</td>
<td>.764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.164</td>
<td>.507</td>
<td>1.222</td>
<td>4.705**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun owner</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.330</td>
<td>1.759</td>
<td>3.586</td>
<td>8.411*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of violent crime</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.006</td>
<td>.387</td>
<td>1.039</td>
<td>1.574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives on campus</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.115</td>
<td>1.110</td>
<td>1.186</td>
<td>1.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aStrongly disagree serves as the reference (comparison) category.
*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

### Table 5. Multinomial logistic regression results for comfort with guns on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student perceptions</th>
<th>Low comforta</th>
<th>Moderate comfort</th>
<th>High comfort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.858</td>
<td>1.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3.745***</td>
<td>4.252***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.953</td>
<td>.823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3.004*</td>
<td>9.296***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun owner</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.926</td>
<td>19.835***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of violent crime</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.568</td>
<td>.759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives on campus</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.548</td>
<td>.512</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aLow comfort serves as the reference (comparison) category.
*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.
legislation were passed. The multinomial logistic regression models for these measures are presented in Tables 4, 5, and 6, respectively. As illustrated in Table 4, males have significant greater odds than female respondents to strongly agree as compared to strongly disagree that guns on campus offer a protective value (OR = 3.923, p < .01). Similarly, a statistically significant difference was found between Republicans and non-Republicans. Specifically, those students that self-identified as Republican have greater odds of strongly agreeing, rather than strongly disagreeing, that there was a protective value with having concealed firearms on campus as compared to those who did not affiliate with the party (OR = 17.298, p < .001).

Meaningful differences across respondents also were found with respect to perceived comfort with the presence of guns on campus (Table 5). Compared to females, males have 4 times greater odds of expressing that they would have high comfort with guns on campus as compared to lower comfort with their presence (OR = 4.252, p < .001). Similarly, both Republicans (OR = 9.296, p < .001) and gun owners (OR = 19.835, p < .001) have significantly higher odds of expressing high, rather than low, comfort with guns on campus than their respective counterparts. Less uniform results were found in the context of potential safety policies that could be enacted if guns were allowed on campus, as illustrated in Table 6. Whites, compared to non-Whites, have significantly lower odds of supporting enacting safety policies (agree: OR = .603, p < .01; strongly agree: OR = .539, p < .01) than to strongly disagree with implementing such measures. Interestingly, gun owners, when compared to those who do not own firearms, not only have greater odds of agreeing than to strongly disagreeing with the implementation of safety policies (OR = 5.921, p < .001), but some individuals sharing this characteristic expressed neutral (OR = 9.411, p < .001) or disagreeing (OR = 1.042, p < .001) attitudes about these measures. These results are discussed further in the next section.

Discussion

Since the shooting at Virginia Tech, community stakeholders—including politicians, college and university administrators, and other vested groups—have sought ways in which to increase campus safety while simultaneously trying to prevent another similar attack from occurring. Among these approaches was the idea to allow for concealed handgun licensees to carry their weapons on campus, which has drawn little public support from both the public (Hemenway et al., 2001) and students (Cavanaugh et al., 2012; Jang et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013) alike. Irrespective, however, states have begun enacting such policies into law, Texas being among the most recent. This has led researchers to consider how students—the largest group of stakeholders potentially impacted by the implementation of such policies—perceive the presence of concealed handguns on campus.

The present study sought to add to this limited yet growing body of research by examining how students at a university in the Northeast, located within a state that largely has strict gun control measures in place, perceived such campus carry policies. In line with previous research, the findings indicate that respondents identifying as male, Republican, and a gun owner were both more likely
than not to support concealed carry on their campus and to continue their enrollment if such a policy were passed as opposed to finding another institution. Further, these same groups expressed greater comfort with guns on campus, which also may have influenced such perceptions.

A notably divergent finding in the present study is that while the majority of students collectively expressed disapproval for concealed carry on campus policies, this lack of support was lesser than in previous studies (Cavanaugh et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2013). This potentially is correlated with the general political climate of the state, which emphasizes more gun control over less, such as the right to carry. In other words, students may be less likely not to support similar legislation because they assume that the same restrictions that apply to concealed carry in the state would apply to the campus. Thus, given the considerably more restrictive process that New York has in place to obtain the necessary licensing and the relative regulations on where carrying can take place, respondents may view a concealed carry on campus policy as unlikely and therefore not an issue of concern. Additional research, however, would be needed to test this proposition.

The findings of the present study have broader implications in the context of public opinion and concealed carry on campus. Cavanaugh et al. (2012) posit that in the context of this highly controversial issue, college campuses are considered to be unique environments. Yet the findings of the present study, consistent with those that came before it, suggest instead that the same demographic predictors of support for gun rights legislation more broadly also apply to concealed carry on campus policies. Consequently, while colleges and universities may be unique environments, attitudes related to this specific area of concern mimic the broader demographics of the nation at large.

Moreover, this suggests that the debate between gun control and gun rights is viewed as a dichotomous issue, such that individuals either only are for or against concealed carry or other provisions. In reality, however, issues surrounding this debate are far more complex and multidimensional and therefore should be considered independently rather than as part of a larger political controversy. Different policies related to concealed carrying of guns are created and used for different purposes; thus, it is expected that people should feel differently about different facets of the larger debate. The findings here, however, suggest that this is not the case and that the specificity of the issue does not impact individual’s perceptions. As more nuanced considerations related to firearms in society continue to arise, this lack of specificity can present an impediment to creating meaningful policy for either side of the debate.

The present study, while adding to the existing yet limited body of research on student perceptions of concealed carry on campus legislation, is not without its limitations. First, while efforts were made to keep the email solicitation as general as possible so as to not dissuade either supporters or opponents of concealed carry from participation, it is possible that the overarching single theme may have produced this unintended effect, thereby potentially threatening the internal validity of the study. Moreover, as noted, the university where the research was conducted is located in New York State, which currently is under one of the most comprehensive gun control packages in the nation. Accordingly, while the views expressed in this study may be representative of the university itself and are largely consistent with previous studies’ findings, they cannot necessarily be generalized to other states with similar political climates. Researchers therefore should continue to examine the perceptions about these laws by those individuals who stand to be impacted by them and to what extent such attitudes actually influence the enactment of such policies by lawmakers.

Notes

1. It is important to note, however, that this study examined cases of gun assault rather than a mass shooting more specifically (see Branas et al., 2009).
2. While the subject of the email varied based on whether it was an initial contact or follow-up request, it did indicate that the researchers were soliciting general opinions about concealed carry on campus policies. Though unable to be determined, it is possible that this did impact the response rate.
3. The following link, which opened in a new browser window, was included here as an example of such regulations: https://campuscarry.utexas.edu/policies.

4. Although this analytic approach is most appropriate, it does maintain certain limitations. Comparisons are made between each category of the dependent variable. This limits the inferences that can be made to across categories of the dependent variable to only comparisons to the reference category, strongly agree. Furthermore, this categorization of the logistic regression analysis results in a loss of power in the regression estimates.

5. Multicollinearity was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF) and was not determined to reach problematically high levels (VIF < 4).

References


