



Concealed Carry on Campus—Research Can Inform the National Debate

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The right to bear arms is guaranteed by the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, yet its meaning and impact is still heavily debated in states and statehouses nationwide.

The U.S. Supreme Court (*Washington, D.C. vs. Heller*, 2008) has affirmed that it is an individual’s right to keep in their homes firearms for self-protection. *McDonald vs. Chicago* (2010) extended this finding to the states, incorporating the Second Amendment under the Fourteenth Amendment, and ensuring that states and municipalities could not impose regulatory laws that prohibit gun ownership. The *Heller* decision also defined handguns as “arms,” and struck down the provisions of the Federal Firearms Regulations Act of 1975 that required gun-owners in the District of Columbia to keep their firearms unloaded and locked. However, *Heller* also asserted that the right to bear arms is

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not without limits, and reinforced the stipulations of the 1968 Gun Control Act that such limits may extend to the prohibition of

carrying a concealed weapon and of certain individuals—such as felons and people with mental illnesses—to own a gun. Also, the finding upheld the laws prohibiting gun carrying in “sensitive” areas, such as schools and government buildings. Today’s debate largely centers around “concealed carry” and refers to an individual’s right to bear arms on their person, so long as the guns are hidden from view. By 2014, all 50 states had signed into law legislation permitting concealed carry, with varying degrees of regulation. Most states require a permit; 11 others do not. About half of the states require some safety training, but only six require live-fire training (Mascia, 2017). In 44 states, individuals may also “open carry,” and in 28 of these states, the allowance is considered “non-restrictive” (no license required).

The right to carry a concealed weapon is also not without limits, but only one limit applies to all states: concealed carry is not permitted in federal government buildings. Other venues in which concealed carry is not permitted vary by state: schools, churches, hospitals, bars, and political venues are some of the places in which firearms are commonly restricted. In some states, businesses and private entities can post signs declaring their site as a “gun-free zone,” and individuals caught carrying in these places may be arrested for trespass, lose their license to conceal carry, or pay a fine.

There is disagreement among individuals about the effectiveness of “gun-free zones,” places in which guns are not permitted, on reducing gun violence. Some argue that “gun-free zones” are inviting to non-law abiding individuals, who will not disarm and instead will feel secure in knowing

that they will not face armed opposition. Current research, on the other hand, suggests that most gun-related crimes are situated in places

that have meaning to the individual and not chosen because they are “gun-free zones.” In an analysis of mass shootings (defined as four or more deaths) from January 2009 to July 2015 by Everytown.org, the majority (70%) took place in the home (domestic violence), and only 13% took place in “gun-free zones.” (Analysis of mass shootings, 2016).

Recently, however, states have begun to reduce the limitations on concealed carry, and laws have removed restrictions from carrying in bars (e.g., Tennessee, Arizona, Georgia, and Virginia), churches (only two states explicitly prohibit; most leave the decision up to the individual church), airports (most states allow concealed carry in “non-sensitive” areas such as baggage claim), and most contentiously, schools.

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The right of individuals to be able to carry a concealed weapon on a college or university campus was first addressed in 1824, when Thomas Jefferson and James Madison attended a board meeting at the University of Virginia, during which the following statement was made: “No student shall, within the precincts of the University, introduce, keep or use any spirituous or vinous liquors, keep or use weapons or arms of any kind ...” (Li, 2016).

Before legislative efforts were made at the state level, individual schools began to allow students to carry a concealed weapon on campus, first at Blue Ridge Community College in Weyers Cave, Virginia (2003; later rescinded) and then, in the same year, Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins. In 2004, Utah became the first state to legalize campus carry, and in 2009, three students sued the Colorado University Board of Regents, arguing that the CSU ban on handguns violated their right under Colorado state law to carry concealed. Initially dismissed, the suit was later won on appeal, and in 2010, Colorado became the second state to allow concealed carry on public campuses.

Before 2007, concealed carry on college campuses was a relatively minor issue and garnered only a local or statewide audience. Then, on April 16, 2007, 23-year-old Seung-Hui

Cho, a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, shot and killed 32 of his classmates and faculty members and wounded 17 others before taking his own life. The shooting was the deadliest shooting rampage by an individual gunman (surpassed only recently by the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooter) and sparked a debate between gun-control advocates and opponents. Advocates argued that easy accessibility to guns and lax gun laws made it possible for Cho, a mentally unstable individual, to purchase the weapons he used in the massacre. Opponents argued that the university’s ban on handguns made it impossible for faculty and students to defend themselves. After the shooting, a group of students came together to form the national organization Students for Concealed Carry on Campus (shortened to Students for Concealed Carry).

Despite strong support from the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other pro-gun organizations, individuals and groups advocating for concealed carry on college campuses comprise a vocal minority. For example, Students for Concealed Carry, the key organization of “college students, professors, college employees, parents of college students,

and concerned citizens” numbers 43,000 (according to their website: <http://concealedcampus.org/about/>), a relatively small number given the millions of individuals that comprise these groups.

On the other hand, 428 colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical schools in 43 states have joined the Campaign to Keep Guns off Campus. A survey of 1,789 students at two universities, one in southeastern Texas and another in Washington state, revealed that three times as many students felt “not at all” comfortable at the prospect of guns on campus than felt “very comfortable” with the idea (Cavanaugh, Bouffard, Wells, & Nobles, 2012). Interestingly, their feelings regarding guns in the off-campus community were more evenly split, suggesting that the college campus is a unique environment, one in which the majority of students do not believe guns have a place. A similar study of 1649 students at 15 public mid-western universities revealed that 78% were not supportive of guns on campus (Thompson et al., 2013). Even on a campus in Northern Colorado that permits concealed carry, the majority of students surveyed

said that more guns on campus would likely have more negative than positive consequences, including increases in accidental discharges and completed suicides (Sanfilippo & Weed, 2017).

Knowing that students may be legally carrying a firearm will also increase the job complexity for faculty and administrators, who have frequent interactions with distressed students, and for campus police, who will need to discern in a crisis situation who the “good guy with a gun” is.

Faculty feel similarly: 94% of 791 faculty at 15 universities in five states in the Great Lakes region said that they would not support concealed carry, the overwhelming majority reporting that they feel safe on their campuses (Thompson, Price, Drake, & Teeple, 2013).

Several other state and national organizations have issued position statements in opposition to the movement, including: (1) the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA position statement), (2) a number of national student affairs associations (ACUHO), and (3) the Association of Title IX Administrators. These and other organizations argue that allowing concealed carry on college campuses is highly unlikely to prevent or mitigate mass shootings. Instead, they argue, more guns on campus will increase the risk of suicide and intentional and unintentional shootings by young people who are often stressed, depressed, anxious, and/or intoxicated. Knowing that students may be legally carrying a firearm will also increase the job complexity for faculty and administrators, who have frequent interactions with distressed students, and for campus police, who will need to

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discern in a crisis situation who the “good guy with a gun” is. At one point, the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA) had a position statement opposed to concealed carry (Sprague, 2008), but currently, the organization does not have a position on the issue.

In the 2015 legislative session, 16 states introduced bills to allow concealed carry on college campuses; all failed except for Texas, where the right to conceal carry became law in August 2016, on the anniversary of the first mass shooting on a college campus (when, in 1966, Charles Whitman shot 43 people from the UT tower, killing 13 of them). In 2016, 19 states introduced bills; all failed except for Tennessee (where only full-time staff can conceal carry) and Georgia. The bill in Georgia was vetoed by the governor, Nathan Deal, who quoted Thomas Jefferson’s and James Madison’s 1874 statement. One year later, though, at the end of the 2017 legislative session, Deal signed similar legislation, allowing concealed carry on public campuses. Georgia and Arkansas became the next two states passing such legislation in 2017.

According to a report by Johns Hopkins University and the National Conference of State Legislatures, as of May 2017, 16 states currently ban students and the public from carrying a concealed weapon on college and university campuses (with the exception of Tennessee, where “certain faculty members may carry weapons on campus”; Webster, Donohue, Klarevas, Crifasi, Vernick, Jernigan, et al., 2015). Twenty-four states allow their colleges and universities to make individual choices about campus concealed carry. In the remaining ten states, institutions of higher education must comply with state laws allowing concealed carry on campus. Of those states, institutions in Colorado, Idaho, Mississippi, and Utah may not prohibit concealed carry anywhere on campus, whereas in Arkansas, Georgia, Kansas, Oregon, Texas, and Wisconsin, certain restrictions are considered lawful.

In 2016, I testified before one of the Senate subcommittees considering the bill that would allow concealed carry on college campuses in Florida. During my testimony, one of the senators asked if there had been incidents of firearm-related suicides, homicides, and accidental discharges on the campuses in states where concealed carry had long been permitted. The question prompted a survey (“Concealed Carry on College Campuses”) of university chiefs of police in four

states, two that permit concealed carry (Utah and Colorado) and two comparable states that do not (Wyoming and New Mexico). With the assistance of IACLEA, surveys were completed by chiefs of police (or their designees) in schools throughout Colorado (10 responses), Utah (3 responses), Wyoming (2 responses), and New Mexico (1 response). Only three schools, all in Colorado (where concealed carry is permitted), reported any incidents; these included brandishing, accidental discharge, and suicide (Sanfilippo & Weed, 2017).

The limitations of the current survey are clear—a small sample and limited response rate. Additional data, difficult to obtain, are necessary to explore the impact of allowing concealed carry on college campus populations. Nonetheless, the data obtained by a recent study out of Johns Hopkins suggest that campus shootings, though far less common, occur in circumstances similar to off-campus shootings. From January 2013 through June 2016, researchers identified only 85 incidents of shootings or undesirable discharges of firearms on college campuses in the United States. Only two of these 85 incidents (2.4%) involved a “rampage” shooter. The most common incidents were interpersonal disputes that escalated into gun

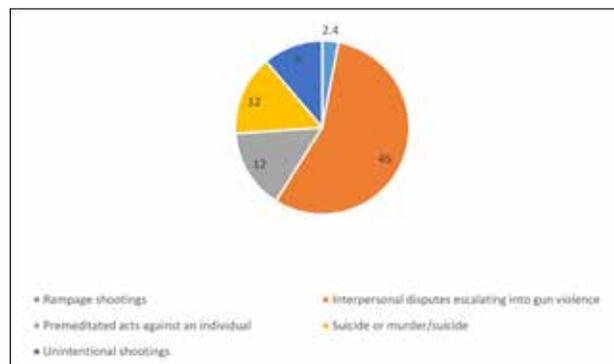


Figure 1: Types of Shootings on College Campuses, January 2013-June 2016 (John Hopkins analysis of Everytown.org data)

violence (45%), premeditated acts of violence against an individual (12%), suicides or murder/suicides (12%), and unintentional shootings or discharges (9%). See Figure 1.

College campuses are, compared to the surrounding communities, fairly safe spaces for students to live, learn, and interact. According to a recent analysis (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2015), from January 2005 to July 2015, there were 133 mass shooting incidents; only five (4%) took place in schools, including primary, secondary, and college campuses. Moreover, according to a 2014 analysis by the U.S. Department of Justice, sexual assaults are 1.2 times more common among 18 to 24-year-old non-students than among the same-age college student cohort (Sinovich & Langton, 2014). All other forms of violence—assault and robbery—were also much higher among non-students. Suicide presents a different picture, however. More than 1,000 college students commit suicide each year; another 20% seriously consider it (Emory University, nd; Reetz, Bershada, LeViness, & Whitlock, 2017). In comparison to the same age non-student population, the rate among females is the same, but the rate for male students is 12-33% lower than the same age non-student male population (Schwartz, 2013).

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According to the National Center for College Counseling Directors, the method of suicide by students varies: in the most recent survey, 27% committed suicide by firearm. By comparison, 45% of suicides among individuals 18 to 24 in the general population were committed by firearm from 2010-2015 (https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal_injury_reports.html). Is it access to a firearm that makes the difference, as Schwartz (2013) concluded? A recent survey (Sanfilippo & Weed, 2017) of Directors of College Counseling Centers at colleges and universities across the United States revealed that on the campuses allowing concealed carry, 42.9% reported student suicides involving firearms; on those campuses not permitting concealed carry, the rate was only 13.3%. Attempted suicide rates by firearm were 42.9% compared to 6.7%. See Figure 2

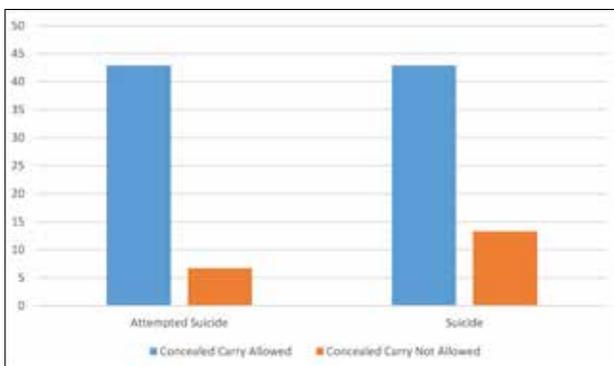


Figure 2: Suicide and Attempted Suicide by Firearm on Campuses with an without Concealed Carry (Sanfilippo & Weed, 2017)

The issue of allowing concealed carry on college campuses is a contentious one, with liberties and safety at odds with one another. The data suggest, however, that the risks of allowing guns on campus outweigh any potential benefits. 🍌

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