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Guns on College Campuses: A Clash of Perspectives

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Abstract

Campus safety is an ongoing concern at colleges and universities nationwide. The escalation of gun violence in society has prompted many politicians to propose concealed carry legislation that would permit guns on campuses. The academy is grappling with this contentious issue as constituents both on and off campus advocate either for gun bans or for concealed carry policies in the name of campus safety. This paper explores the second amendment context of this issue, reviews the pros and cons of permitting guns on campus, and discusses several violence prevention strategies that higher education institutions can utilize.

Introduction

A basic human need in any culture is safety and security – few communities in American society are more concerned about these issues than colleges and universities. The campus carry debate is a critical issue that finds its way into the news, state legislatures, and courts frequently. This issue is not new. The assertion that shootings on campuses are becoming more frequent was made over a decade ago (Kranz, 2006). As higher educators grapple with keeping campuses safe, there is growing political pressure to allow the concealed carry of guns on campuses (Birnbaum, 2013). In recent years, the issue has become intensely politicized with few on either side looking at the facts since research is lacking: “We know very little about how either gun violence or the presence of guns on campus affect student attitudes and behaviors” (Birnbaum, 2013, p. 13). In this paper, we will discuss how the Second Amendment applies to the debate, outline the arguments of both sides, and delve into research on the topic before offering some violence prevention strategies.

Second Amendment

The Second Amendment of the United States Constitution reads: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed” (U.S. Const. amend. II). For many years, the United States had legal consensus that this amendment affects state militias only. In 2008, *District of Columbia v Heller* changed this assumption when the Supreme Court determined that the Second Amendment protects *individuals’* right to bear arms (Birnbaum, 2013). In the opinion, Justice Scalia mentioned schools as a “sensitive place” that are not affected by this interpretation of the Second Amendment which leaves gun bans at colleges and universities up for Constitutional interpretation.

Some experts believe that the Second Amendment does not provide guidance on campus carry, so decisions will continue to be made by states and individual institutions (Rostron, 2016). Currently states have significant freedom to determine whether guns are permitted on college campuses. Some allow guns, some allow weapons in only certain areas, and others ban guns completely (Birnbaum, 2013). State laws regarding guns on campus tend to fall along political lines: blue states have mostly upheld their gun bans at colleges and universities while many red states have changed the law to permit firearms (Carry & Hecht, 2014). As of 2016, campus carry was permitted in nine states and outlawed in twenty (Morse, Sisneros, Perez, & Sponsler, 2016).

The Debate

Discussion about whether to allow concealed weapons on college campuses has become more controversial over the years as mass shootings become more commonplace in American society. Proponents of campus carry and those who believe it is inappropriate find little common ground (Cramer, 2014).

The Pro-Gun Position

Those who are in favor of campus carry often refer to Second Amendment rights. This interpretation of the Second Amendment argues that self-defense is a Constitutional right, and campuses are safer when people can protect themselves and others with guns (Carry & Hecht, 2014). Proponents of campus carry may feel unsafe in gun-free zones without a weapon because someone with the intention to kill will know that everyone will be unarmed (Carry & Hecht, 2014). People who believe that concealed weapons should be allowed on campus are more worried about violence and have less trust in the police, a 2017 study found (De Angelis, Benz, & Gillham, 2017). However, among students who actually bring weapons to college, the presence of such fears is no higher than among students who do not carry weapons (Jang, Kang, Dierenfeldt, & Lindsteadt, 2015). Perhaps being armed alleviates such fears.

Some advocates blame the administration of Virginia Tech for fighting a campus carry bill in 2006, the year prior to the massacre on campus that took the lives of 32 people and wounded 15 (Burnett, 2012). Shortly after the Virginia Tech shooting, Students for Concealed Carry was created and started the nationwide push to allow concealed firearms on campus (Cramer, 2014). Students for Concealed Carry argues that students have a right to self-defense and guns will deter potential shooters. Some evidence corroborates the idea that campus carry reduces violence: at Colorado State University, fewer crimes have been reported since the institution began permitting concealed weapons on campus (Burnett, 2012). Whether the number of reported crimes reflects the number of actual crimes is unclear.

The Anti-Gun Position

In a 2012 study of attitudes of campus concealed carry, researchers found that 70% of students, faculty, and staff do not believe concealed weapons should be allowed at colleges and universities (Patten, Thomas, & Wada, 2012). When responses were analyzed by gender, the data revealed that women were even more likely than the general population to oppose concealed carry: “80% did not want qualified individuals to be able to carry a gun on campus, did not feel safer with more concealed guns on campus, and did not think additional guns would promote a greater sense of campus safety” (Patten, Thomas, & Viotti, 2013). Women’s fears seem to be justified: a 2017 study of campuses in states that have allowed concealed carry on campus found that these states have all seen an increase in reported sexual assaults after the legislation went into effect (Biastro, Larwin, & Carano, 2017). Such legislation appears to be making women in particular—who are more likely to be victims of sexual assault than men—less safe.

Those opposed to campus carry often cite the appropriateness of the environment as a reason to ban guns on campus, arguing that academic freedom and a healthy learning environment are paramount (Wood, 2014). Faculty in particular have voiced concerns that the

presence of firearms inhibits the free exchange of ideas because participants in discourse worry about violence (Carry & Hecht, 2014). Among these faculty worried about a “culture of fear” are several professors who resigned from their institutions in Kansas when a law allowing campus carry went into effect (Drew, 2017).

Concerns about student responsibility come up frequently. Students’ brains are still developing until age 24, and impulse control is not yet fully formed for traditionally aged college students. This means that students in this age group are more likely to take risks than people only a few years older. In fact, in a 2002 study, “students who reported having a gun on campus disproportionately engaged in high-risk behaviors endangering themselves and others” (Miller, Hemenway, & Wechsler, 2002, p. 57). With so many students experimenting with drugs and alcohol, adding guns to the mix strikes many as unwise. In fact, alcohol is a factor in suicide and violence on campus: 66% of suicides, 95% of violent crimes, and 90% of rapes involve students who are intoxicated. A recent study found that students carrying guns on campus binge drink more often than students who do not carry weapons (Walter, Dunn, Anderson, & Florkowski, 2015). Campus gun ban advocates argue that arming these students makes campuses more dangerous.

Student development theory is also a factor for those who are anti-campus carry. Carry and Hecht (2014) analyzed the gun debate using Kohlberg’s theory of moral development. Carry and Hecht posit that students vary in readiness to handle the responsibilities of carrying a firearm on campus depending on where the students are in Kohlberg’s stage theory. Some highly developed students are able to view arming themselves as a decision based on upholding the social contract and protecting the community, some students who are less developed might be torn between their discomfort with the responsibility of carrying a firearm and feeling disadvantaged by missing one if a gunfight were to break out, while others—less developed than

the students previously described—are focused on their own self-interest, which could make carrying a weapon dangerous for everyone (Carry & Hecht, 2014).

Evolution of State Laws

Between the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007 and a study in 2012, 22 states considered campus carry legislation (Burnett, 2012). Legislation has been introduced in other states, but finding an accurate and up-to-date information has been challenging because politicians move so quickly and there is no central list. Laws enacted vary from mandating campus carry for institutions, legalizing it but allowing discretion for individual institutions to write their own policies, and banning guns on campus outright.

On the extreme side, guns are permitted on Kansas college campuses without almost any restrictions. This, combined with the law that does not require firearm safety training or even permits for concealed carry, has many worried about the potential for violence both intentional and accidental (Najmabadi, 2016b). Texas has also legalized campus carry at all public institutions, but with some leeway for college and university policies. (Sandoval, 2016). Individual institutions can decide whether to designate some areas as gun-free zones, such as dormitories or faculty offices (Mangan, 2016b). However, faculty at some institutions argue that their university's policies for granting gun-free zones are prohibitively arduous. For example, at Texas A&M, faculty wanting to designate their offices as gun-free spaces need signatures from four university administrators, including the university president. The criteria for approval includes demonstrating that a gun “presents a significant risk of substantial harm due to a negligent discharge” or research areas are for “high-risk human subjects” or “high-hazard materials or operations,” though these terms are not defined by the university (Mangan, 2016b). Texas law limits restricted gun access to single-occupancy offices—which is problematic for graduate students who often share—so many in Texas have begun holding office hours at local

bars where gun laws still remain in effect (Najmabadi, 2016a). Whether students under the age of 21 can attend these office hours is unclear.

Ohio took a more moderate approach when legalizing campus carry this year. The new law specifically states that individual institutions get to make their own policies. With this caveat in place, every institution in Ohio decided to uphold their existing policies which do not allow guns (Farkas, 2017). For now, campus carry is technically legal in Ohio but is not allowed at any of its public colleges or universities.

Michigan is one of the many states that has banned guns at all colleges and universities within its borders. In 2008, the Michigan legislature approved a campus carry bill, but it was ultimately vetoed by Governor Snyder (Lawler, 2017). A similar bill passed the Michigan Senate on November 8, 2017, but there is little to indicate that the governor has changed his mind. In 2017, a Michigan appeals court upheld the gun ban at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. A student sued, arguing that the university is part of the local government and thus subject to the state law prohibiting local government from limiting gun ownership. The appeals court disagreed, and the University of Michigan gun ban was upheld (Turnage, 2017).

Realities of Gun Violence on Campus

Mass Shootings and Homicide

Between 2001-2016, there were 190 shootings on college campuses and 437 victims, 167 dead and 270 injured. The number of students potentially affected is staggering: “An estimated 2.5 million students were enrolled at the 142 colleges where shootings occurred, and, thus, were directly or indirectly exposed to gun violence” (Cannon, 2016). We know that survivors of mass shootings experience lasting physical and psychological trauma (Hoover, 2017) though there is little research regarding those at institutions who did not personally witness shootings.

The number of shootings and people injured has skyrocketed in recent years. Between 2001-2016, the number of shooting incidents has increased by 153% and the number of total casualties has increased by 241% (Cannon, 2016). Gun violence is becoming more common on college campuses, and shootings are becoming less shocking. During a review of the college shootings in the last ten years since Virginia Tech, the authors realized we only knew about a few of them. We experience gun violence at U.S. institutions of higher education so often that they blur together and sometimes don't make the top headlines at all.

As previously discussed, some states and institutions have responded to the increase in gun violence at colleges and universities by allowing campus carry. The idea of the "good guy with a gun" being the only person able to stop the "bad guy with the gun" is pervasive in American culture, but many law enforcement professionals disagree with its effectiveness:

Deciding whether to carry a gun to class, to use that gun in defense of self or others, and to take the life of a classmate are all life-changing decisions. Police officers and military soldiers train for years in preparation for this responsibility; 18-year-old college students are less likely to have any formal training to prepare them for this sequence of important decisions (Carry & Hecht, 2016).

In a survey of college police chiefs, 86% disagreed that permitting students to carry concealed weapons at colleges and universities would prevent homicides (Cramer, 2014). In fact, the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA) stated in 2008 that allowing students to bring weapons to campus does not make colleges and universities safer and may have the opposite effect by increasing crime. The IACLEA also noted that a fraction of a percentage of deaths by firearm are incidents of self-defense (Dickerson, 2012). This is corroborated by an FBI study that found out of 104 mass shootings between 2000-2012, less than 3% were ended by people with concealed weapons (New, 2017). Research into the active shooter

events suggests that the idea of the “good guy with the gun” stopping a “bad guy with a gun” is a myth.

In fact, having armed bystanders could create more danger for the campus community. The IACLEA has concerns about police response at campuses where guns are allowed (Dickerson, 2012). If police respond to an active shooter situation on campus and many students are holding weapons, how will they accurately find the shooter without injuring or killing innocent students who happen to be armed? For this reason, armed students at Umpqua Community College in Oregon did not intervene during a campus shooting. They were afraid of being mistaken for the shooter by police responding to the situation (New, 2017).

Suicide

Despite the frightening increase in gun violence on college campuses, the odds of being killed in a shooting are still incredibly low: “The chance of being a homicide victim on campus in 2010 was about one in 875,000, approximately the same chance that the average U.S. citizen faces of being struck by lightning” (Birnbaum, 2013). Students are far more likely to commit suicide than harm others, which is a real concern with guns on campus. A 2011 study found that 1,100 college students commit suicide every year, and 9-11% of students seriously consider suicide. Carry and Hecht (2014) point out that adding a gun makes the likelihood of successfully committing suicide much higher: “85% of gun suicide attempts are fatal.” With students far more likely to harm themselves than use a weapon for self-defense, allowing guns on campus seems foolish.

Intimidation

As previously mentioned, cultivating an environment that encourages the free exchange of ideas is a central concern for advocates of campus gun bans. Faculty have spoken up about the fear of giving students low grades or even saying something students won’t like in states where

campus carry is lawful. In Texas, lawyers for three professors at the University of Texas-Austin have argued that guns “can have a chilling effect on free speech” (Mangan, 2016a). Though infrequent, faculty have been targeted by armed students in Arkansas and California (Wilson, 2016). Recently, Spalding University experienced a scandal involving guns on campus. A student showed another student a gun in her car—parked on campus—and “said in angry terms that she was tired of ‘these people’ bothering her,” according to an American Association of University Professors (AAUP) report. The student who saw the gun notified the university and asserted that the student with the gun was referring to harming faculty in the social work program. Guns are allowed on campus according to state law in Kentucky, so the university did nothing. A professor who criticized the university’s handling of this incident was fired soon after, with the university president claiming the firing was due to the professor punishing the student who brought the gun to campus with low grades. The professor maintains that she was fired for criticizing the university’s response to the threat, and the report released by the AAUP calls the firing a violation of academic freedom (Schmidt, 2017). This incident might be attributed to the “weapons effect,” a noted phenomenon that manifests as “the mere presence of a weapon increasing feelings of anger in both aggressive and nonaggressive individuals” (Morse, Sisneros, Perez, & Sponsler, 2016). Regardless of whether someone intends to quiet debate or limit controversy, the existence of guns on campus raises emotions.

Negligence

Students’ ability to be responsible with firearms is a common concern for those opposed to campus carry, and an issue that comes up repeatedly in the news. Just during the past three years, institutions in Texas have seen several incidents of accidental gunfire since the state law allowing guns on college campuses went into effect. In September 2016, a licensed gun owner accidentally discharged a gun in a dorm room at Tarleton State University (Dreid, 2016). A

similar incident happened at Texas A&M in September of 2017 when a licensed gun owner allowed a non-licensed person to hold his gun in the student's dorm room and it went off (Kuhlmann, 2017). No one was hurt in either incident, but someone could have easily been shot.

Violence Prevention

For both campuses that allow concealed weapons and those that don't, preventing gun violence is a concern. Administrators are aware that the next incident could happen at their institutions, and their campuses need to be prepared. There are several steps recommended in the literature and additional considerations for institutions that allow concealed carry.

Mental Health and Student Interventions

According to Slone and Tucker (2014), student intervention and crisis response teams have become crucial to campus administration: "The threat of gun violence, it appears, is not *if* it will happen, but *when*." Having a streamlined process for faculty, staff, and students to report members of the campus community who might be dangerous or simply needing additional support is crucial for a healthy institution. Teams of trained faculty and staff can connect those identified with support resources available to them. Such processes don't need to be centered on violence prevention—after all, counseling and support services are a great idea for everyone regardless of mental health—but such groups can certainly put together patterns of concerning behavior that might otherwise go unnoticed. Making this procedure routine, and working to frame mental health services as a normal part of the college experience, can de-stigmatize seeking support, which is beneficial for all members of the campus community (Slone & Tucker, 2014).

Weapons Policy

Creating a campus weapons policy and communicating it clearly is essential. Whether concealed weapons are allowed on campus should be stated, but there are other considerations as

well. Military groups like ROTC will need clarity on weapons exceptions and procedures. Additionally, campuses that allow concealed weapons on campus or hunting rifles in residence halls need to create weapons storage guidelines and modify facilities accordingly (Slone & Tucker, 2014). This weapons policy should be stated clearly and be easily accessible to the entire campus community. It should also be explained to incoming students, current students, faculty, and staff, and campus police should be prepared to answer any questions.

Emergency Planning

Creating an emergency plan with campus or local police, fire departments, counseling services, and crisis management teams is a necessity in today's world (Slone & Tucker, 2014). Such a plan should be explained to all colleges and departments within the institution, and campus police should work with these groups to create emergency plans within their own units that mirror the plan of the larger institution. Additionally, an emergency communication system should be set up and regularly tested so the campus community can be notified quickly of any threats or dangerous situations on campus.

For police, such emergency plans require additional resources. There is a financial cost to what is needed: gun safes, cameras all over campus, and gunshot detection systems may be needed for violence prevention and fast responses to gun violence (Pettit, 2016b). Police already routinely monitor social media for threats against their colleges and universities at many institutions (Pettit, 2016a), but more police staff lines might be needed to deal with the additional responsibilities of dealing with reported threats or gun sightings on campuses that allow conceal carry (Pettit, 2016b). Police also need to practice active shooter drills during campus breaks, so they are prepared for potential shootings without alarming students during the academic year (Slone & Tucker, 2014). The additional responsibilities and funding needs for campus police

should be considered carefully by all institutions so students, faculty, and staff can be reasonably safe on campus.

Conclusion

Allowing concealed carry on college and university campuses seems to ease the anxiety of some without making anyone safer in reality. Conversely, permitting concealed carry on campuses increases the anxiety of faculty and may chill the learning environment for students as they grapple with ideas that are challenging, controversial, and emotional. The ability of students, some as young as 18 years old, to shoulder the responsibility of safely carrying and potentially using a firearm to kill another person is questionable at best, especially when the research tells us that students who carry weapons are more likely to binge drink and make decisions that endanger themselves and others. The likelihood of students accidentally discharging a weapon or using it to harm themselves is far greater than the odds of them using a weapon to successfully stop an active shooter. Even if they do manage to take out a shooter, having armed students may slow down police response and endanger innocent bystanders who are carrying weapons.

For all of these reasons, we believe that allowing concealed weapons on college campuses is unwise. While the political climate in the United States makes universal ban of guns on campuses unlikely, it is important to continue to conduct research on the effects of gun bans and campus carry policies in higher education. Conversations about weapons on campuses must continue and should be guided by reason and the results of legitimate research. While institutional weapons policies will continue to be challenging and controversial, the academy must work toward a consensus that promotes safety for all on our campuses.

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