Student Attitudes Toward Concealed Handguns on Campus at 2 Universities

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We examined student support for a policy that would allow carrying of concealed handguns on university campuses. Large percentages of students at 2 universities expressed very low levels of comfort with the idea of permitting concealed handgun carrying on campus, suggesting that students may not welcome less restrictive policies. Students held slightly different opinions about concealed handguns on and off campus, suggesting that they view the campus environment as unique with respect to concealed handgun carrying. (Am J Public Health. 2012;102:2245-2247. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2011.300473)

In response to shootings on college campuses, several states have considered legislation that would allow individuals possessing a concealed handgun license to carry concealed handguns on campus. In Texas, a bill allowing licensed individuals to carry concealed handguns on campus passed the state senate in May 2011 but was struck down in a procedural move in the house.

Some research has measured the general public's opinions about the presence of concealed handguns at universities. A few studies have also characterized gun carrying among college students, with results showing that students carrying guns are more likely to be male and White, to engage in binge drinking and risky behaviors, to be in trouble with the police, and to attend college in the southern and mountain states. With the exception of binge drinking and risky behaviors, which have only recently been linked to gun ownership and carrying, these results generally conform to studies of guns among other populations in the country. However, research on college students' views on gun control is exceedingly rare.

METHODS

We collected survey data from undergraduate students at 2 public universities, one in southeastern Texas and one in eastern Washington (both of which indicated the desire to remain anonymous). Both states had considered legislation to permit carrying of concealed handguns at universities at the time of data collection in 2009. Classes were randomly selected from 5 academic buildings typical of large classroom buildings on the Texas campus and 2 similar buildings on the Washington campus. Sixteen classes per building were randomly selected, and instructors were solicited; 39 classes in Texas and 9 in Washington participated (a number of classes refused or did not respond).

Researchers introduced themselves at the start of each class, described the project, and solicited students' participation. We calculated response rates by dividing the total number of completed surveys by the number of students registered for the class. After elimination of blank surveys and surveys completed by respondents who indicated that they were not students in the class, response rates were 74.8% (1414 of 1850 students) in Texas and 72.1% (375 of 520 students) in Washington. We included respondents who completed a survey in multiple classes in the calculation of response rates because those students were included in the denominators; however, they were discounted for the analysis. Both samples largely represented each university's demographics, including age, race, and ethnicity. The Washington sample slightly underrepresented male students on that campus.

The survey measured several attitudes and individual characteristics believed to correlate with opinions about carrying of concealed handguns on campus (Table 1). Dependent variables were assessed through 2 questions: “How do you feel about the presence of concealed handguns in the community?” and “If it were legalized, how would you feel about the presence of concealed handguns on campus?” Attitudinal questions (including these dependent variables) involved response options ranging from 0% to 100% (e.g., 0%=not at all comfortable, 100%=very comfortable). Other items measured how closely students followed news about violence on campus, concerns about campus violence, and confidence in the police to prevent campus crime.

RESULTS

With respect to the question about comfort with guns on campus, students in the Washington sample were more than 3 times as likely to report that they were not at all comfortable with concealed handguns on campus as they were to report that they were very comfortable (in Texas the ratio was similar, greater than 2:1). Conversely, these ratios were closer to 1:1 in relation to the question about comfort with guns in the community. These patterns suggest that students regard the campus as a unique environment in terms of concealed handgun carrying.

Table 2 displays odds ratios for multivariate models predicting comfort with carrying of concealed handguns on campus and in the community. In ordered logistic regression models, these parameters are proportional odds ratios representing the effect on the level of the dependent variable after a 1-unit change in a given independent variable when all other terms in the model are held constant. The dependent variables were recoded into Likert-type scales (0 = 0%, 1 = 0%-24.9%, 2 = 25%-49.9%, 3 = 50%, 4 = 50.1%-74.9%, 5 = 75%-99.9%, 6 = 100%). Several independent variables were associated with gun-related opinions: region, gender, political party, off-campus victimization experiences, handgun carrying behaviors, following violent news, and concern about campus violence.

Students' opinions regarding a policy change were very similar across these universities, and the predictors of support were also comparable.
DISCUSSION

Students at the 2 study universities were relatively uncomfortable with allowing the carrying of concealed handguns on campus. The results of changing campus handgun carrying policies are not limited to crime and violence. The campus community's emotional and behavioral reactions are also relevant; unfortunately, these concerns appear not to have been sufficiently considered in policy discussions. Our results imply that policy changes may not increase students' feelings of safety on campus.

Because faculty, staff, administrators, and campus police were not surveyed here, future research should address opinions held by other university stakeholders. Research should also explore, in greater detail, the correlates of students' opinions on this topic. Replication is needed in other parts of the country to determine the generalizability of our results. Although the universities examined here are located in distinct regions of the country, they may not represent other universities in these states or across the country. Further studies and new metrics could overcome limitations of self-reported data, including faulty recall, intentional misrepresentation, and social desirability bias.

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At the time of the writing, Michael R. Cavanaugh was with the College of Criminal Justice, Sam Houston State University, TX. Jeffrey A. Boudfford, William Wells, and Matt R. Nobles were with the College of Criminal Justice, Sam Houston State University.

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This article was accepted September 16, 2011.

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All of the authors contributed to the conceptualization and writing of the article.

Acknowledgments
This article was presented at the March 2011 conference of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

We thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments. We also thank both universities, along with the faculty, staff, and students, for their participation in the study.

Human Participant Protection
The institutional review board at each study university approved this research. All surveys were voluntary and anonymous, and included a cover sheet explaining that consent was implicit upon completing the survey.

References