

Campaign to Keep Guns Off Campus

The Case Against Guns on Campus

Background

Nearly all colleges and universities have policies that prohibit or severely restrict the possession of firearms on campus. Now these policies are in jeopardy. Following mass shootings at Virginia Tech (2007) and Northern Illinois University (2008), and other recent mass shootings, the gun lobby is pushing legislation in several states that would take away the right of a college or university to regulate firearms on campus.

The proposed legislation would allow any person with a permit to carry concealed weapons, including students, to possess and carry concealed handguns on campus – in classrooms, student centers, sporting events – and to keep firearms in student dormitories and fraternity houses.

The Case Against Guns On Campus

The case against guns on campus is strong. The college age years are among the most volatile periods in a person's life. As such, these are the peak years for abusing alcohol and drugs, attempting suicide, experiencing other mental health problems, and committing gun crimes. Students who engage in binge drinking and drug abuse put themselves and others at risk. If guns are present, it is more likely that these situations will result in serious injury or death.

America's colleges and universities are among the safest environments for students. Whereas mass shootings such as those that occurred at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University attract national attention, in the universe of gun violence, these events are rare. In fact, America's colleges and universities are among the safest environments for students. Much safer than the communities that surround them where guns are more available. A U.S. Department of Justice study found that 93 percent of violence against college students age 18-24 occurs off campus.¹ This is due in no small part to the fact that nearly all colleges and universities have policies that prohibit the possession of firearms on campus.

In other environments, more guns mean more gun deaths and injuries. Numerous studies have shown that whenever guns are introduced into an environment, the result is more gun deaths and injuries. The environment that has been studied the most is the home, where study after study has shown that the presence of a gun in the home increases the risk of homicide, suicide, or unintentional shooting of a family member. One study found that a gun kept in the home for self-protection was 22 times more likely to be used to shoot a family member, friend, or acquaintance than a criminal intruder.² For each time a gun was used in a justifiable shooting, there were 7 gun homicides or attempted homicides, 11 gun suicides or attempted suicides, and 4 unintentional shootings. Other studies have shown that workplaces that allow workers to carry firearms and other weapons at work are 5-7 times more likely to be the site of an on-the-job homicide.³ It stands to reason that introducing guns into college campuses would only increase the risk of gun violence to students, faculty, and staff.

More guns will result in more fatal suicide attempts. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for college age young adults, exceeded only by accidental death (mostly from motor vehicle accidents). On average, about 1,100 college students commit suicide each year while another 24,000 attempt suicide.⁴ Whereas suicide attempts by overdosing on drugs (the most common method) are fatal only about 3% of the time, suicide attempts with firearms are fatal more than 90% of the time. It goes without saying that making firearms more available to college students will make it more likely that more of the 24,000 unsuccessful suicide attempts each year will be fatal.

Conceal carry licensees are a threat to public safety. The gun lobby claims that people who get permits to carry concealed weapons are "law-abiding, upstanding community leaders who merely seek to exercise their right to self-defense." Contrary to the above, a growing body of evidence reveals that conceal carry licensees are a threat to public safety. An ongoing study by the Violence Policy Center documents that since May 2007, citizens legally allowed to carry concealed handguns have killed at least 14 law enforcement officers and 485 private citizens, including 35 shooters who killed themselves after the attack.⁵ In addition, permit holders have committed at least 23 mass shootings (three or more victims) that claimed a total of 98 innocent lives. An analysis of these incidents shows that the vast

majority of victims were spouses and other family members, friends, and acquaintances of the shooter who were shot during an argument or dispute, altercation, or relationship problem.

Armed students would be unlikely to prevent a mass shooting. Most states prohibit possession of a handgun by anyone under age 21, meaning that only a small percentage of students would be able to legally obtain a permit to carry a concealed weapon, if they choose to apply for one. Given that homicides and mass shootings on college campuses are rare events, it is extremely unlikely that an armed student would be in a position to prevent a mass shooting. Furthermore, conceal carry licensees are not trained in the use of deadly force or how to respond in a crisis situation the way certified law enforcement officers are trained. The gun lobby's vision of a "designated shooter" in every class to protect others from attack is a fantasy. On the other hand, the unintended consequences that would result if guns were readily available to students – shooting during an argument or dispute, attempted suicide, unintentional shooting, etc. – are real and would make college campuses more dangerous every hour of every day.

Campus law enforcement is opposed to guns on campus. The International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators, Inc. (IACLEA) issued the following statement.

"IACLEA Board of directors believes 'conceal carry' initiatives do not make campuses safer. There is no credible evidence to suggest that the presence of students carrying concealed weapons would reduce violence on our college campuses."⁶

Allowing guns on college campuses will reduce a school's competitive position. America's colleges and universities compete for the best faculty, staff, and students from both from within and outside the state. The best faculty, staff, and students have choices about where they work or go to school. Allowing guns on college campuses will make it more difficult for colleges and universities to attract the best faculty, staff, and students.

¹K. Baum & P. Klaus, U.S. Dept of Justice, *Violent Victimization of College students*, 1995-2002 (2005).

² A. Kellerman, *Injuries and Deaths Due to Firearms in the Home*, *Journal of Trauma*, Aug. 1998.

³ D. Loomis, S Marshall, and M. Ta, *Employer Policies Toward Guns and the Risk of Homicide in the Workplace*, *American Journal of Public Health*, May 2005

⁴ M. Cintron, *College Campuses Grapple with Escalating Suicide Rates* at www.nearwestgazette.com.

⁵This study is updated monthly at www.vpc.org/ccwkillers.htm.

⁶ IACLEA Position Statement, *Concealed Carrying of Firearms Proposals on College Campuses*, Aug. 12, 2008.