



Guns on College Campuses

Students' and University Officials' Perceptions of Campus Carry Legislation in Kansas

Emily Reimal, Sino Esthappan, Paige S. Thompson, and Jahnvi Jagannath

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In 2013, Kansas became the 11th state to pass “campus carry,” a law mandating that colleges and universities allow concealed firearms on campus. Motivated in part by the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, where a student killed 32 students and professors,¹ these laws have sparked contentious debates among college and university students, faculty, and staff across the US regarding the implications of allowing guns on campuses. This brief is one part of the Urban Institute’s two-part series exploring campus carry legislation in Kansas, and focuses on Kansas students’ and university officials’ views about guns on campus. We begin with an overview of the Kansas law and a short review of existing research on stakeholder perceptions of campus carry, followed by findings from Urban’s interviews with college and university officials and a survey of college students.

Kansas Legislation Allowing Guns on Campus

In 2013, the Kansas state legislature amended the Personal and Family Protection Act to allow eligible people ages 21 and older to carry concealed firearms in most public buildings. The amendment incorporated a four-year exemption for public higher education institutions, giving campuses until July 1, 2017 to prepare to comply with the law. Then, in April 2014, Kansas Governor Samuel Brownback signed HB 2578, which barred local governments from enforcing local firearm laws, making gun laws uniform across the state.² These laws further limited public universities’ ability to uphold policies that banned guns on campus.

The Personal and Family Protection Act allows campuses to continue prohibiting handguns in public buildings only if they implement adequate security measures, defined as the use of electronic equipment and armed personnel at all public entrances to detect and restrict the carrying of weapons into the building.³ Such measures were generally considered prohibitively expensive, particularly as universities felt the impact of a \$30.7 million cut to the state's higher education system as part of a state income tax cut.⁴ Only Kansas State University, the University of Kansas, and Wichita State University opted to provide the extra security measures that would enable them to continue prohibiting firearms, and only in select facilities for athletic and other events on a case-by-case basis. The Kansas Board of Regents, the governing and coordinating board for the state's 6 universities and 32 public higher education institutions,⁵ allowed campuses to formulate their own implementation plans provided they meet its policies and the state's requirements.

In the four years between the 2013 amendment of the Personal and Family Protection Act and the expiration of the exemption, student and faculty protests and lobbying against the policy gained national attention.⁶ Anxiety about the policy was compounded in 2015 when the Kansas state legislature removed the requirement to obtain a permit to carry concealed firearms, eliminating the previously required licensing fee, successful completion of an eight-hour safety and instructional training course, and clearance of a background check. As additional states consider legislation permitting guns on campuses, more university administrators and state legislators are considering the policy's implications for campus safety and the higher education environment.

Review of Existing Research

An abundance of research documents the predominantly negative attitudes of students, faculty, and staff toward laws permitting guns on college campuses. Some of these studies were conducted in states without policies allowing guns on campus, and others were conducted early in the implementation process, meaning the views reflected in these studies were based either on hypothetical changes or limited experience with campus carry.

University Students

Several studies drawing samples of students from colleges and universities in California, Kansas, Nebraska, Texas, Washington, and at 15 public universities in midwestern states found majorities of students opposed to allowing guns on their campuses (Brinker and Swayne 2015; Cavanaugh et al. 2012; Patten, Thomas, and Wada 2012; Thompson, Price, Dake, Teeple, and Bassler et al. 2013). Some studies revealed support for the policy varied based on respondent demographics. For example, several studies indicate that men, Republicans, criminal justice majors, and gun owners are more likely to support the policy than other groups (Bennett, Kraft, and Grubb 2012; Bouffard et al. 2012; Cavanaugh et al. 2012; Price et al. 2014; Schildkraut, Elsass, and Meredith 2018; Thompson, Price, Dake, Teeple, and Bassler et al. 2013).

Before implementing the legislation in Kansas, the Kansas Board of Regents Student Advisory Committee commissioned a student gun policy opinion survey. Across the six regents universities, 55 percent of the 20,651 respondents disapproved of the law. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of students reported they would feel less safe if other students carried handguns on campus, and nearly half (48 percent) believed allowing guns on campus would result in increased crime (Brinker and Swayne 2015).

University Faculty and Staff

Studies have found that majorities of faculty and staff also oppose the policy, reasoning that allowing concealed weapons decreases people's sense of safety on campus, negatively impacts campus climate, increases the potential for gun-related injuries, and strains already tight security budgets (Bennett, Kraft, and Grubb 2012; Patten, Thomas, and Wada 2012; Somers, Fry, and Fong 2017). Studies have also found opposition to the policy across national samples of university presidents (Price et al. 2014; Price et al. 2016), university faculty in five Great Lakes states (Thompson et al. 2013), and community college faculty in 18 states (Dahl, Bonham, Jr., and Reddington 2016).

A survey of 1,889 community college faculty in 18 states showed that the majority felt safe on their campuses, opposed allowing guns on campus out of concern that it would generate an unsafe campus climate, and disagreed that students' ability to carry handguns would increase overall perceptions of safety or enable bystanders to protect themselves or others in the event of an active shooting (Dahl, Bonham, Jr., and Reddington 2016). A survey of faculty, staff, and student perceptions of faculty carrying handguns on campus found that only 26 percent believed instructors and staff should be armed while working or teaching (Watson, Guzman, and Scheel 2018).

Research has also documented faculty concerns about such policies' impacts on certain populations and academic departments and programs. For example, in 100 interviews with women faculty and staff before and during implementation of campus carry laws in Texas, respondents reported that departments with more financial resources hired private security consultants to evaluate risks in their offices and classrooms, whereas smaller, resource-strapped departments lacked funding to train their employees about the law and gun safety precautions. Interviewees also expressed concern about the ways the presence of guns on campus and enforcement of the policy could exacerbate existing power relations based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and disabilities (Somers, Fry, and Fong 2017).

Somers and colleagues (2017) also documented the more nuanced ways that respondents felt these policies impacted the learning environment of higher education institutions in Texas. In addition to concern for students' well-being and safety, faculty perceived the presence of guns on campus to have negative effects on their teaching and the overall climate of the institution. When asked about how the policy impacted their relationships with students, many reported fearing candid discussions with students about their academic performance because of the possibility of angry responses from students. As a result, some faculty and graduate assistants opted to hold office hours at off-campus locations that barred firearms, such as privately owned businesses, rather than in their offices. Faculty mentioned being more passive during classroom discussions and reported that their students told them

they also planned to be less involved and critical in classroom discussions about controversial topics (Somers, Fry, and Fong 2017).

Overall, existing research indicates that majorities of faculty, staff, and students are opposed to the presence of firearms in academic settings. However, much of these data were collected either before laws allowing guns on campuses were passed or early in their implementation, and some were collected in states without them, limiting respondents' experience with such policies.

Methods

Urban Institute researchers conducted interviews with higher education professionals and fielded a survey of college students to gather a range of perspectives on the impact of policies allowing guns on campus. The sections that follow outline recruitment and data collection procedures, as well as the sample characteristics for each activity.

Stakeholder Interviews

To understand administrative perspectives and record the variety of institutional responses to the state's law allowing guns on campuses, Urban researchers interviewed 15 higher education stakeholders in Kansas between August and December 2018. Contact lists were assembled using college and university websites to identify potential respondents based on presumed likelihood of knowledge of or experience with the policy associated with their professional roles. Researchers sent an initial invitation to participate via email and followed up twice by email or phone in the event of no response. The participation rate was roughly 15 percent; of the 101 people who were invited, 75 did not respond, 11 declined, and 15 ultimately agreed and participated in interviews.

The interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews were semistructured and based on a protocol covering impacts of the policy (including how the respondent's college or university prepared for the law to take effect), perceptions of the policy before and after implementation, and challenges and benefits associated with the policy. Interview content was recorded and transcribed, and then coded and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Researchers interviewed 15 respondents from 9 public colleges and universities in Kansas, including 3 community colleges. Respondents included university presidents and vice presidents, deans, a general counsel, police chiefs and other officials tasked with public safety and emergency management on campus, and various administrators and professors who had experience with the policy and their institution's efforts to prepare for it to take effect.

Student Surveys

To capture students' perspectives and experiences, Urban researchers fielded a survey in March 2019 through a panel service platform provided by SurveyGizmo. Respondents were drawn from a network

of survey panelists who elected to participate in surveys for a small payment or for points that can be applied toward gift cards. The survey was administered to panelists via email and was accessible online through a URL hosted by SurveyGizmo. The recruitment email was targeted to panelists in Kansas, and respondents were further narrowed with a screening question to determine if they were attending a college or university on-campus in the state. The survey instrument (see the appendix) comprised 10 items including the screening question, and covered respondents' familiarity with handguns, their awareness of the policy allowing guns on campus, their college's or university's efforts to disseminate information about the policy, and their reactions to the potential presence of handguns on their campus. The data were processed and analyzed using Stata, software for statistics and data science.

Two hundred fifty-one students attending classes on a college or university campus in Kansas completed the survey. Approximately 82 percent attended a public college or university, and the remaining 18 percent attended a private college or university. Less than a third of students (31.6 percent) reported never having held or fired a handgun. Slightly more than half (51.4 percent) indicated that they had previously held or fired a handgun but did not own or carry one, and the remaining 17 percent indicated that they currently owned, have carried, or regularly carried a handgun in public places.

Findings

The interviews and surveys revealed several notable themes regarding stakeholders' awareness of the policy allowing guns on campus and their perceptions of safety concerns related to the policy.

Awareness of the Law and the Presence of Guns on Campus

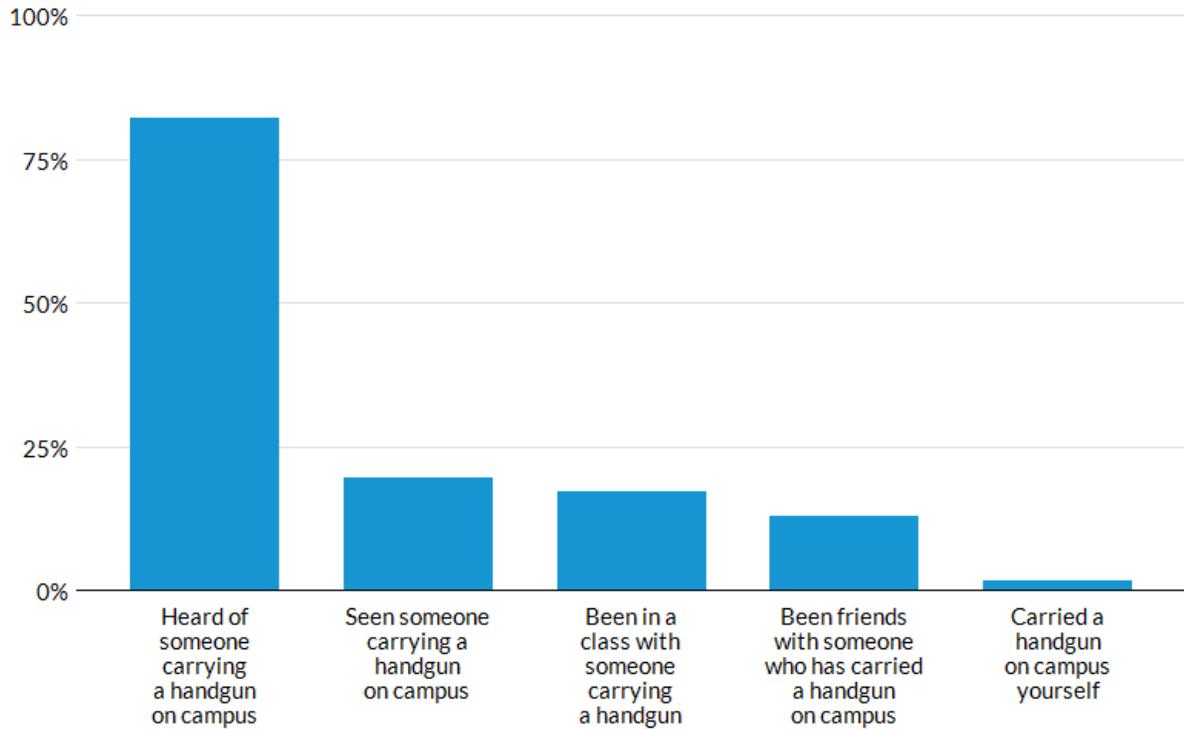
Despite university officials' concerted efforts to communicate information about the law to members of the campus community (Thompson et al. 2019), interviewees reported that many students and faculty were unaware of the policy, and discussions about it were limited to a few particularly engaged people and groups. The survey of people attending public colleges and universities in Kansas validated this perception; roughly half of respondents reported believing (incorrectly) that guns were not legal on campus (30.1 percent) or that they did not know whether they were legal on campus (20.4 percent).

Despite varying levels of awareness of the policy, students were generally aware of the presence of guns on campus (figure 1). More than three-quarters of students surveyed (82.1 percent) reported that they had heard of someone besides law enforcement or private security officers carrying a handgun on campus.

FIGURE 1

Kansas College and University Students' Awareness of Handguns on Campus

Excluding armed law enforcement or private security officers, have you ever...



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Note: n=251.

A much smaller share of students (19.5 percent) reported personally witnessing someone carry a handgun on campus. Likewise, modest shares of students reported being personally acquainted with someone carrying a handgun on campus, either as a friend (17.1 percent) or as a classmate (12.7 percent). Few respondents (1.6 percent) disclosed carrying a handgun on campus themselves.

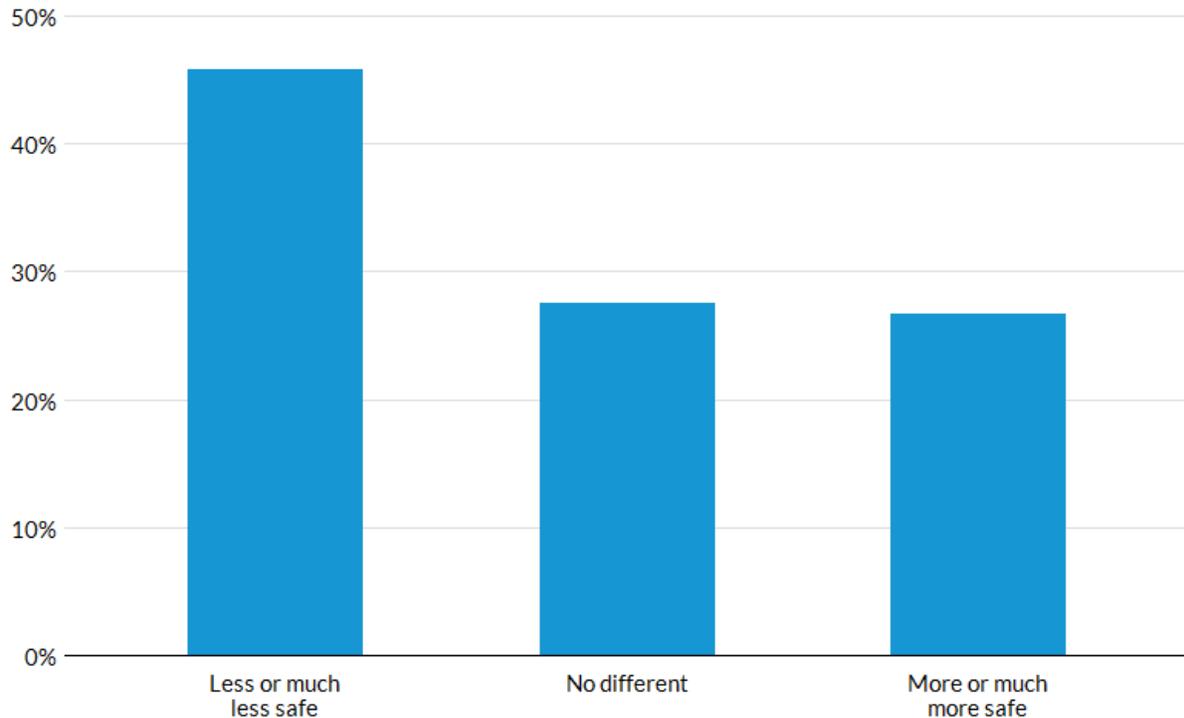
Safety Concerns Related to the Law

Though students' awareness of the policy varied, interviewees reported receiving feedback from campus stakeholders before and during implementation of the policy, and they shared their own perceptions and those that members of their campus communities had expressed to them. They noted that support for the policy was relatively rare among higher education stakeholders, and that those who did support it were mostly students who cited the sense of security that carrying a concealed handgun would provide. However, the consensus among interviewees was that majorities of students and faculty opposed policies allowing guns on campus, owing in large part to safety concerns. As shown in figure 2 below, nearly half (45.8 percent) of student respondents indicated that they would feel less safe or much less safe if someone else in their class was carrying a handgun on their person.

FIGURE 2

Kansas College and University Students' Perceptions of Safety

If someone in your class was carrying a handgun on their person, would you feel...



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Note: n=251.

Some interviewees reported a positive outcome of the law regarding safety concerns, namely that institutions' active efforts to communicate information about the law prompted valuable discussions about campus safety that may not have otherwise taken place. In this way, the implementation of the law elevated the issue of campus safety among students and school administrations. Ongoing conversations about the policy also prompted university officials to revisit campus safety and security procedures, which were outdated in some cases.

Interviewees reported that safety concerns about guns on campus concerned two major areas: (1) the lack of training requirements and related potential for mishandling and injury, and (2) the ways the presence of guns change the dynamics of interactions on campus.

LACK OF TRAINING

Respondents' most common concern was the potential for irresponsible use and mishandling of guns on campus. Interviewees reported that the lack of training required to carry concealed handguns on campus was a major source of apprehension among students and faculty, both before and after the policy was implemented.

If you are of age and you are breathing ... you can get a weapon with no training whatsoever. You don't even have to know how to use the weapon. You can go get one, and you can carry it. You don't have to be licensed and you don't have to be trained. To me, that's scary.

—University official

Interviewees underscored that without the tools and guidance provided during training, those with handguns might be unprepared to carry them safely. More specifically, interviewees reported that many in the campus community expressed feeling uneasy about whether those carrying handguns would have the requisite knowledge to exercise precautions that would prevent unintended discharges. More than a third of students surveyed (34.3 percent) indicated that they were extremely concerned about someone on campus mishandling a handgun, and more than half (50.6 percent) reported being slightly, somewhat, or moderately concerned. Only approximately 15 percent of respondents reported that they were not at all concerned about someone mishandling a handgun on campus.

TABLE 1

Kansas College and University Students' Concerns about Mishandling Handguns on Campus

How concerned are you about someone mishandling a handgun on campus (gun left unattended, accidental discharge of firearm, etc.)?

	Freq (%)
Not at all concerned	38 (15.1)
Slightly concerned	47 (18.7)
Somewhat concerned	39 (15.5)
Moderately concerned	41 (16.3)
Extremely concerned	86 (34.3)

Note: n=251.

There was notable variation in the degree of concern students expressed based on their reported levels of experience handling handguns. Among those who reported never having held a handgun, a greater proportion reported being extremely concerned (38.5 percent) than being not at all concerned (26.9 percent). Conversely, among those who reported owning a handgun or having carried or regularly carried a handgun in public spaces, a greater proportion reported being not at all concerned (38.1 percent) than being extremely concerned (28.6 percent).

Fears about mishandling of firearms on campus were realized in relatively few cases. During interviews, university officials reported a few incidents where loaded handguns were found abandoned on campus, and university officials were uncertain about whom they belonged to and whether they were left intentionally or misplaced. Interviewees noted that although these incidents were memorable, they were infrequent.

CAMPUS CLIMATE

Interviewees reported that members of their campus communities were concerned about how the presence of handguns could change the dynamics of interactions on campus by generating fear and intimidation that would impact the intellectual environment, relationships between students and teaching staff, and social interactions in general.

Many campus community members remarked that the presence of concealed handguns on campus could escalate tensions during classroom debates. Interviewees noted some students and faculty were hesitant about engaging in controversial discussions in class out of fear of intimidation or threats from students carrying concealed handguns. As one university official put it, “At some level, there was perhaps a little ... elevation of the fear of what happens if I get into a heated conversation with someone and they just decide to reach in their backpack and pull out a gun? I think many students, the things we were hearing from them dealt with how will I know and how can I be sure that if I say something wrong, I’m not gonna get shot?”

A significant share (41.0 percent) of students surveyed reported they were less or much less likely to engage in an intellectual debate with someone carrying a handgun (figure 3). The policy requires handguns to be concealed, so it is unclear whether students’ reported reluctance to engage with someone they know is carrying a handgun results in broader disengagement because of the mere possibility that classmates are carrying guns.

The share of students who reported being less likely to engage in such discussions (41.0 percent) was greater than the share of those who reported no difference (32.3 percent) and those who reported being more likely or much more likely to do so (26.7 percent).

In interviews, university officials noted that faculty members were increasingly concerned about being intimidated by students who disagreed with their decisions. Specifically, faculty members in many colleges and universities felt pressured around grading and expressed hesitation about providing negative feedback on assignments.

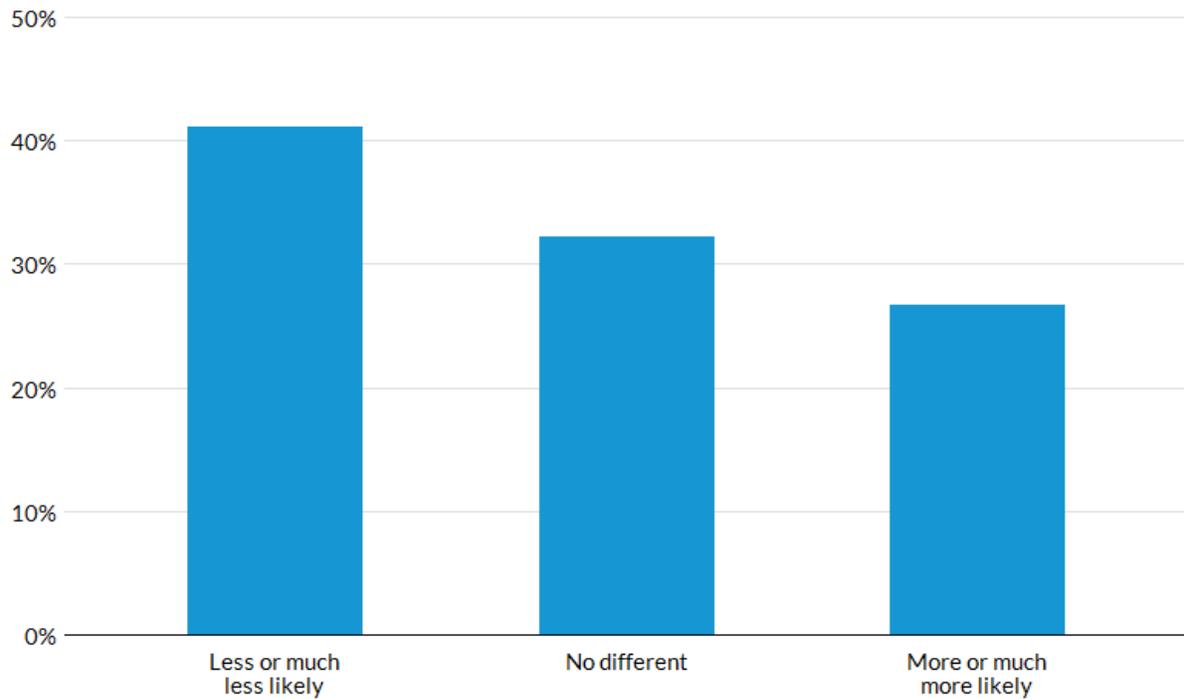
The running joke around campus was that the university was going to have a 4.0 GPA because nobody’s going to give a student a bad grade because they’re afraid to have to confront them.

—University official

FIGURE 3

Hesitance about Participating in Classroom Debates or Intellectual Arguments

Would you be more or less likely to participate in a classroom debate or intellectual argument on campus with someone who is carrying a handgun?



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Note: n=251.

Interviewees reported that some faculty and teaching staff protested the policy because they no longer felt safe teaching students who could bring handguns to class.

Respondents also reported that the presence of guns could impact dynamics in aspects of campus life beyond academic interactions, such as at athletic or social events where alcohol is allowed. Students surveyed were asked to report their level of concern for such scenarios, and each of the five response options on this item was selected by roughly 20 percent of the sample, suggesting wide variation in students' levels of apprehension (table 2).

TABLE 2

Kansas College and University Students' Concerns about Handguns and Alcohol

How concerned are you about the potential for someone carrying a handgun at an event on campus (tailgate, party, etc.) where alcohol is present?

	Freq (%)
Not at all concerned	52 (20.7)
Slightly concerned	49 (19.5)
Somewhat concerned	50 (19.9)
Moderately concerned	52 (20.7)
Extremely concerned	48 (19.1)

Note: $n=251$.

A greater share of those who reported that they had never previously held a handgun indicated that they were extremely concerned about the potential for someone carrying a handgun at an event on campus where alcohol is present (24.3 percent) than being not at all concerned (8.9 percent). Among those who reported owning a handgun or having carried or regularly carried a handgun in public spaces, 28.6 percent indicated that they were not at all concerned about attending campus events where alcohol is present, compared with 14.3 percent who reported being extremely concerned.

Students were also asked to rate their degree of concern about the potential for someone brandishing a handgun on campus (table 3). Roughly one-third reported no concern or extreme concern, and two-thirds reported feeling slightly, somewhat, or moderately concerned.

TABLE 3

Kansas College and University Students' Concerns about Brandishing a Handgun on Campus

How concerned are you about the potential for someone brandishing a handgun on campus?

	Freq (%)
Not at all concerned	42 (16.7)
Slightly concerned	60 (23.9)
Somewhat concerned	52 (20.7)
Moderately concerned	58 (23.1)
Extremely concerned	39 (15.5)

Note: $n=251$.

Among respondents who reported never having held a gun, a greater proportion reported being extremely concerned (21.8 percent) than being not at all concerned (10.3 percent). Among those who reported owning a handgun or having previously carried or regularly carried a handgun in public spaces, a greater proportion of respondents reported being not at all concerned (23.8 percent) than being extremely concerned (9.5 percent).

Moreover, the effects of the policy on the nature of academic relationships and the general campus climate may be felt differently among different subpopulations. Perceptions of legislation allowing guns

on campus do vary across student groups and demographics, and interviewees emphasized that concerns among students of color were especially pronounced. They explained that students of color had voiced concerns about feeling unsafe or unwelcome on campus even before news about the policy was made public. The presence of handguns on campus elevated these concerns, and university officials reported that they lacked adequate resources and guidance and felt ill-equipped to respond to these concerns.

Interviewees reported that some faculty had threatened to resign or otherwise leave campus because of the policy both before and after it took effect. Some interviewees reported a few cases of faculty following through on their threats and resigning their positions, citing the presence of handguns and feelings that their voices were not heard during the preparation and implementation process as primary reasons. However, these cases were rare, and most people remained on campus despite overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the policy.

It was high anxiety at the beginning, but as things moved on, it slipped into the background.
—University official

Most interviewees reported that the initially heightened fear before and during early implementation has since levelled. As one university official said, “When the legislature first announced that this was happening, there was a fair amount of paranoia on campus, almost to hysteria ... I think some of those fears were really there at the start, and now, honestly, people aren’t talking about it anymore.” A few interviewees noted that reports of gun violence at other schools induces some vicarious trauma, but anxiety levels decline or plateau as time passes without severe incidents occurring on their own campuses.

Conclusion

Based on interviews with college and university administrators and a survey of students, perceptions of the Kansas law allowing guns on campuses are predominantly negative. Before and during early implementation, the law generated significant anxiety among campus communities. More than a year after the policy was implemented, interviewees reported that those initial fears had begun to fade into the background. Though concerns may no longer be at the forefront of campus discussions, university officials still report that their campus communities hold largely unfavorable perceptions of the policy.

Safety concerns appear to drive this disapproval, with the primary worry being that people can carry firearms without permits or training, creating the potential for mishandling of firearms resulting in accidents. This particular concern remains prevalent: not only was it mentioned frequently in

interviews, but two-thirds of students surveyed reported being somewhat, moderately, or extremely concerned about someone mishandling a gun on campus. Many campus stakeholders also reported concerns about how these policies and the constant potential for the presence of firearms changes the campus climate, particularly the dynamics of academic and social interactions.

These findings suggest some important considerations for states that have passed or are considering passing laws permitting guns on campus. Namely, although initial anxieties may wane, stakeholders' sustained negative perceptions and ongoing concerns merit continued discussion. Legislators and policymakers may consider that affected communities could find these laws more acceptable alongside laws requiring permits and training in gun safety and responsible ownership. These findings also suggest directions for future research, including exploration of methods to quantify the impact of laws that allow guns on campus on the college experience, such as their effects on classroom discussions and candid conversations regarding students' academic performance.

Notes

- ¹ Sara Lipka, "Campaigns to Overrule Campus Gun Bans Have Failed in Many States," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 18, 2008, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Campaigns-to-Overrule-Campus/9639>.
- ² Bryan Lowry, "Kansas Governor Signs Gun Legislation," *Wichita Eagle*, April 23, 2014, <https://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article1140958.html>.
- ³ Personal and Family Protection Act of 2006, K.S.A. 75-7c01.
- ⁴ Rick Seltzer, "What's the Matter with Kansas Budget Cuts?" *Inside Higher Ed*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/05/23/kansas-cuts-criticized-hurting-large-research-universities>.
- ⁵ "About," Kansas Board of Regents, accessed March 2018, <https://www.kansasregents.org/about>.
- ⁶ James Hoyt, "The Surprising Ways Activists Are Protesting against – and for – Campus Carry," *USA Today*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/college/2016/10/07/the-surprising-ways-activists-are-protesting-against-and-for-campus-carry/37422095/>.

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Appendix. Student Survey Instrument

1. Are you currently an on-campus student at a college or university in Kansas?
 - a. Yes, I attend a public college or university in Kansas
 - b. Yes, I attend a private college or university in Kansas
 - c. No, I only take classes online
 - d. No, I am not a college or university student

2. Is it currently lawful for people aged 21 or over to carry a handgun on your campus?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know

3. How familiar are you with handguns? Check all that apply.
 - a. I've never held one before
 - b. I've held a handgun before
 - c. I've shot a handgun before
 - d. I own a handgun
 - e. I have carried a handgun in public spaces
 - f. I regularly carry a handgun in public spaces
 - g. Other, please specify

4. If your campus allows people to carry handguns, how did administration officials share the institution's handgun carrying policy? Check all that apply.
 - a. My college does not allow people to carry handguns.
 - b. Disseminated information (emails, trainings, or website detailing campus handgun carrying policy, etc.)
 - c. Posted signs in buildings and classrooms indicating handgun carrying policy
 - d. Asked for campus community feedback (town hall forum, survey, etc.)
 - e. I am not aware of my college's efforts to educate students on the campus's handgun carrying policy
 - f. I am not aware of my college's handgun carrying policy

5. Excluding armed law enforcement or private security officers, have you ever: Check all that apply.
 - a. Heard of someone carrying a handgun on campus
 - b. Seen someone carrying a handgun on campus
 - c. Been in a class with someone carrying a handgun
 - d. Been friends with someone who has carried a handgun on campus
 - e. Carried a handgun on campus yourself

6. How concerned are you about the potential for someone carrying a handgun at an event on campus (tailgate, party, etc.) where alcohol is present?
 - a. Not at all concerned
 - b. Slightly concerned
 - c. Somewhat concerned
 - d. Moderately concerned
 - e. Extremely concerned

7. How concerned are you about the potential for someone brandishing a handgun on campus?
 - a. Not at all concerned
 - b. Slightly concerned
 - c. Somewhat concerned
 - d. Moderately concerned
 - e. Extremely concerned

8. How concerned are you about someone mishandling a handgun on campus (gun left unattended, accidental discharge of firearm, etc.)?
 - a. Not at all concerned
 - b. Slightly concerned
 - c. Somewhat concerned
 - d. Moderately concerned
 - e. Extremely concerned

9. If someone else in your class was carrying a handgun on their person, would you feel...
 - a. Much more safe
 - b. More safe
 - c. No different
 - d. Less safe
 - e. Much less safe

10. Would you be more or less likely to participate in a classroom debate or intellectual argument on campus with someone who is carrying a handgun?
 - a. Much more likely
 - b. More likely
 - c. No difference
 - d. Less likely
 - e. Much less likely

About the Authors

Emily Reimal is a research analyst in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where she works on projects related to policing, crime prevention, and international development and governance.

Sino Esthappan is a research analyst in the Justice Policy Center, where he works on projects related to policing, juvenile justice, and school discipline.

Paige S. Thompson is a research analyst in the Justice Policy Center, where she works on projects related to policing, human trafficking, and the impact of the justice system on fathers and families.

Jahnvi Jagannath is a policy assistant in the Justice Policy Center. Her work focuses on corrections and reentry and policing.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
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