

Why our Campuses are NOT Safer without Concealed Handguns

Rebutting the Rhetoric of Students for Gun Free Schools

In response to the unprecedented media attention and public support generated by Students for Concealed Carry on Campus (SCCC), the organization leading the charge to extend concealed carry (of handgun) rights to college campuses, a counter-movement has emerged, operating under the banner Students for Gun Free Schools (SGFS). SGFS recently released an essay titled “Why our Campuses are Safer without Concealed Handguns.” This attack on the positions of SCCC brings few, if any, new arguments to the table and relies instead on the well-worn arguments put forth by groups like The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

The crux of the SGFS essay is the undeniable fact that college campuses typically have lower crime rates than the cities in which they reside. Tossing academic standards of research and citation to the wind, the essay’s introduction simply points out this fact and concludes, “Students for Gun Free Schools (SGFS) believes these results can be attributed largely to strict policies that have kept firearms off our nation’s campuses.” Without citing corroborating facts or research, the same gun control advocates who want us to believe that lax gun control laws in nearby states negate the effectiveness of strict gun control laws in the District of Columbia and other tightly regulated cities/states now want us to believe that strict gun control regulations on college campuses are able to stand up against the lax gun control laws in the very cities in which those campuses reside.

To assume a cause and effect relationship between the unenforceable gun control regulations on college campuses and the relative safety of college campuses constitutes an astoundingly naïve leap in logic. A similar disparity can be found between the relatively low crime rates in affluent neighborhoods and the higher crime rates in the cities in which those neighborhoods exist. After all, what are college campuses but, essentially, large, affluent neighborhoods?

After making the unsubstantiated claim that strict gun control regulations make college campuses safer, the essay moves on to present five reasons why SGFS believes that allowing concealed carry on college campuses would make colleges less safe:

- 1) Concealed handguns would detract from a healthy learning environment;
- 2) More guns on campus would create additional risk for students;
- 3) Shooters would not be deterred by concealed carry permit holders;
- 4) Concealed carry permit holders are not always “law-abiding” citizens, and
- 5) Concealed carry permit holders are not required to have law enforcement training.

1) CONCEALED HANDGUNS WOULD NOT DETRACT FROM A HEALTHY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

An opponent of concealed carry on campus isn't doing his or her job unless he or she argues, "Concealed handguns would detract from a healthy learning environment." The SGFS essay contends, "If concealed carry were allowed on America's campuses, there is no doubt that many students would feel uncomfortable about not knowing whether their professors and/or fellow students were carrying handguns." This argument not only ignores the fact that, in the absence of metal detectors and X-ray machines at every campus entrance, students already have no way of knowing who, if anyone, is carrying a gun; it also assumes that students would be made more uncomfortable by the presence of guns on campus than they are by the presence of guns off campus.

In most U.S. states approximately 1% of the population (one person out of 100) is licensed to carry a concealed handgun. Are students afraid to sit in 300-seat movie theaters knowing that, statistically speaking, as many as three of their fellow moviegoers may be legally carrying concealed handguns? Are they afraid to walk through crowded shopping malls knowing that one out of every hundred shoppers they pass is potentially carrying a legally concealed handgun? Or do they go through their daily routines, both on and off campus, never giving much thought to what is concealed beneath the clothing and within the handbags of the people they pass? Does SGFS honestly contend that students on the twelve U.S. college campuses where concealed carry is currently allowed (all ten public colleges in the state of Utah, Colorado State University, and Blue Ridge Community College in Weyers Cave, VA) are afraid to engage in intelligent debate for fear that somebody nearby might have a gun? Does concealed carry discourage debate on the floor of the state legislatures in Texas and Virginia and the other states where it is allowed in the state capitol?

The SGFS essay points to a 1999 survey that asked 1500 respondents, "Do you think regular citizens should be allowed to bring their guns [onto] college campuses?" This survey, which asked only about "regular citizens" and made no distinction for concealed handgun license holders, took place ten years ago, when America's right-to-carry laws were still in their infancy and before many current right-to-carry states adopted "shall-issue" licensing laws. At that time very few Americans were familiar with the process or even the notion of obtaining a concealed handgun license, and it is absurd to suggest that this outdated poll reflects current national opinion on the rights of trained, licensed adults. However, accepting for the sake of argument that a majority of the general public does oppose allowing concealed carry on college campuses, what does that prove? Beyond the 1% who possess concealed handgun licenses, what percentage of Americans can tell you the requirements to obtain a concealed handgun license in their state, much less accurately comment on whether or not concealed carry leads to more or less crime? Public opinion does not always dictate public policy on complicated issues of public safety. The FDA does not poll the public on acceptable procedures for sanitizing meatpacking plants.

2) MORE GUNS ON CAMPUS WOULD CREATE LITTLE IF ANY ADDITIONAL RISK FOR STUDENTS

The SGFS essay goes on to assert, "More guns on campus would create additional risk for students." Citing a study by the Brady Campaign, the essay points to "(1) The prevalence of

drugs and alcohol; (2) The risk of suicide and mental health issues; (3) The likelihood of gun thefts, and; (4) An increased risk of accidental shootings.” The essay doesn’t mention that after allowing concealed carry on campus for a combined total of one hundred semesters, none of the aforementioned twelve U.S. college have seen a single resulting incident of a student under the influence of drugs or alcohol using or brandishing a weapon on campus, a single resulting suicide, a single resulting gun theft, or a single resulting gun accident.

The essay points to a 2007 Columbia University study that concluded, “[N]early half of America’s 5.4 million full-time college students abuse drugs or drink alcohol on binges at least once a month;” however, the essay fails to differentiate between underclassmen and upperclassmen. Since the age limit to obtain a concealed handgun license in most states is 21, it seems only fair to note that a three-year study by The Task Force on College Drinking, commissioned by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), found that ages 18 through 21 is the period of heaviest alcohol consumption for most drinkers in the United States, that college students under the age of 21 are more likely than older students to binge drink and have alcohol related problems, and that the average levels of drinking drop off significantly by the age of 23. In July of 2008 more than 100 university chancellors and college presidents, recognizing that binge drinking is primarily a problem among students under the age of 21 and convinced that college binge drinking occurs because students under the age of 21 are not allowed to drink in the same safe, controlled environments as students over the age of 21, signed on to the Amethyst Initiative, a movement aimed at creating a dialogue over the wisdom of the national drinking age.

According to Dr. Robert D. Foss, manager of alcohol studies at the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center (HSRC), “Almost everybody misperceives how much college students actually drink. When people are asked to estimate it, they almost always way overshoot the reality.” Between 1999 and 2003, HSRC conducted a study that used breathalyzers (as opposed to the anonymous surveys used in the studies cited by SGFS) to gauge the drinking habits of students at the University of North Carolina. According to Dr. Foss, “Our findings ran counter to reports in the national media that portrayed excessive college student drinking as a rampant epidemic.” The study found that two out of three students returning to their residences on Friday and Saturday nights had not had anything to drink and that many of the remaining 1/3 had only had a few drinks. The rate of alcohol consumption during the rest of the week was found to be much lower.

The SGFS essay also points to a 2002 Harvard University study that found that students who have firearms at college are more likely to binge drink, drive while under the influence, use illegal drugs, vandalize property, and get into trouble with the police. What the essay doesn’t point out is that a comparison of the Harvard study’s data to concealed handgun licensing data from that same period of time suggests that fewer (most likely far fewer) than 5% of the gun owners surveyed were concealed handgun license holders. Studies* show that concealed handgun license holders, unlike unlicensed gun owners, are significantly less likely than the general population to engage in criminal behavior.

Despite all of these statistics, the issue of alcohol consumption and reckless behavior by college students is a moot point—this is not a debate about keeping guns out of the hands of college students. Allowing concealed carry on college campuses would not change the rules about who can purchase a firearm or who can obtain a concealed handgun license. It also wouldn’t change the rules at off-campus parties and bars, the places where individuals over the age of 21 are most likely to consume alcohol. And it would not make it legal to carry a handgun while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Changing the rules would simply allow the same

trained, licensed adults who carry concealed handguns, without incident when not on campus, to do so on campus. There is no reason to assume that the same individuals who aren't getting drunk and shooting people outside of college campuses would suddenly get drunk and start shooting people on college campuses.

SGFS's arguments about suicide and the vulnerability of dorm rooms to theft carry very little weight when viewed in light of the fact that this is not a debate about who can own or carry a gun. The overwhelming majority of suicides are committed in the victim's home. Under current regulations, the only students prohibited from keeping firearms in their homes are students living in on-campus housing. At most colleges, on-campus housing is occupied primarily by freshmen and sophomores, students typically too young to obtain a concealed handgun license. A comparison of housing statistics at the University of Texas (a major university with over 50,000 students) to Texas concealed handgun licensing statistics shows a probability of only 10 to 20 concealed handgun license holders living in on-campus housing. Statistically speaking, how many of those ten to twenty individuals are likely to commit suicide in a given year? As for theft, the vulnerability of dorms to theft does not necessitate a campus-wide ban on concealed carry. There are a multitude of security options, from floor safes to safes that bolt to bed frames to community gun lockups.

Concerns about accidental discharges are overblown, to say the least. Accidental discharges of concealed firearms are very rare—particularly because modern firearms are designed with safety in mind and because a handgun's trigger is typically not exposed when it is concealed—and only a small fraction of accidental discharges result in injury. It is silly to suggest that citizens should be denied a right simply because that right is accompanied by a negligible risk.

3) SHOOTERS MAY OR MAY NOT BE DETERRED BY CONCEALED CARRY PERMIT HOLDERS, BUT DETERRING SHOOTING SPREES IS ONLY ONE OF SEVERAL POTENTIAL BENEFITS

SGFS goes on to argue, "Shooters would not be deterred by concealed carry permit holders." To quote Louisiana State Representative Ernest D. Wooton, speaking at the 2008 SCCC National Conference in Washington, D.C., "If we don't try it, are we going to know?"

Though campus shooters are frequently suicidal, they are not simply suicidal—if they were, they would simply shoot themselves at home and leave everyone else alone. Campus shooters go on armed rampages because they misguidedly seek to make a point or attain infamy. It's hard to attain infamy if a concealed handgun license holder ends your shooting spree before it begins. Even if the knowledge that concealed handgun license holders might be present isn't enough to deter all would-be gunmen, an attempted shooting spree thwarted by a licensee might be enough to deter a few.

The SGFS essay points to two attacks on facilities where the shooters knew that law enforcement officers would be present, as evidence that suicidal gunmen are not deterred by armed resistance. Those particular shooters may not have been deterred, but they also didn't cause nearly as great a loss of life as is often caused by shooters in "gun free zones." In those two incidents, the shooters killed a combined total of five people, less than one sixth the total body count from the Virginia Tech massacre.

The issue of concealed carry on college campuses is not just about preventing campus shooting sprees. Though it's the mass shootings that get the headlines, college campuses play host to assaults, rapes, and every type of criminal activity found in the rest of society. The question of whether or not concealed carry would deter would-be mass-shooters should not be the determining factor in whether or not it is allowed on college campuses. Why should a 105 lb. woman who is allowed the means to defend herself against a 250 lb. would-be rapist outside of campus not be afforded that same right on campus? Why should a professor who is allowed the means to defend himself at the local bank and at his neighborhood church be forced to hide under his desk listening to gunshots getting closer, with no recourse but to hope and pray the gunman doesn't find him?

4) CONCEALED CARRY PERMIT HOLDERS ARE NOT ALWAYS "LAW-ABIDING" CITIZENS, BUT THEY'RE STATISTICALLY MORE LAW-ABIDING THAN MOST

Students for Gun Free Schools unnecessarily points out, "Concealed carry permit holders are not always 'law-abiding' citizens." This is true. Likewise, law enforcement officers, elected officials, and clergy members are not always "law-abiding" citizens. Every segment of society has its bad apples, but statistically speaking, concealed carry has fewer than most. Numerous studies* by independent researchers and state agencies suggest that concealed handgun license holders are five times less likely than non-license holders to commit violent crimes. A comparison of statistics** in the mid-nineties, when Florida was still one of the few shall-issue states, found that Florida concealed handgun license holders were three times less likely to be arrested than were New York City police officers.

Despite the fact that Students for Concealed Carry on Campus does not advocate concealed carry by unlicensed individuals, SGFS finds it necessary to point out that Alaska and Vermont do not require (though Alaska offers) a license to carry a concealed handgun. The essay then goes on to erroneously suggest, "The primary requirement for obtaining a permit in [the 38 shall-issue] states is to pass a background check through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System." In reality, many states, such as Texas, require applicants to submit to extensive state and federal fingerprint and background checks that often take one to three months (far from instant) to complete.

The essay further blurs the line between the requirements to purchase a firearm and the requirements to obtain a concealed handgun license by stating, "The only misdemeanor convictions that would prohibit someone from owning and purchasing firearms, however, are those related to incidents of domestic violence. Someone who obtains a concealed carry permit in a shall-issue state could have a rap sheet with other types of misdemeanor convictions, including violent offenses." The factors that can disqualify an individual from obtaining a concealed handgun license vary from state to state, but most states place certain restrictions and time limits on misdemeanor offenders. For instance, in the state of Texas you cannot obtain a concealed handgun license if you have had any misdemeanor convictions greater than a traffic citation in the past five years. A current license holder who commits a misdemeanor greater than a traffic violation would immediately have his or her license revoked.

The SGFS essay refers to several mass-shooters and erroneously suggests that several of them either possessed or would have qualified for concealed handgun licenses. For example, the

essay mentions Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech Shooter, even though his adjudication as a danger to himself and others would have disqualified him from obtaining a concealed handgun license in most shall-issue states. Contrary to the claims of SGFS, mental health rulings are commonly considered by states when deciding whether or not to issue a concealed handgun license.

Perhaps most discrediting of SGFS's many claims is its citation of a widely discredited 2001 study by the Violence Policy Center, a highly biased gun control advocacy group. The study claims that Texas concealed handgun license holders were arrested for weapon-related offenses at a rate 81% higher than the general population of Texas age 21 and older, between January 1, 1996, and December 31, 2000 (SGFS mistakenly lists the end date as August 31, 2001). This study, which took place during the first five years of Texas's concealed handgun licensing program, when police officers were not always clear on the new weapons laws and often took a "better safe than sorry" approach to making arrests, focused solely on arrests, not convictions. According to Texas Department of Corrections statistics from that same period of time, Texas concealed handgun license holders were 7.6 times less likely than non-license holders to be arrested for violent crimes (as opposed to the weapons crimes—which can include nonviolent offenses such as attempting to carry a concealed handgun into a federal building—researched by the Violence Policy Center). A four-year study by engineering statistician William E. Sturdevant found that Texas concealed handgun license holders were 5.5 times less likely than non-license holders to be convicted of violent crimes. According to statistics from the Texas Department of Public Safety and the U.S. Census Bureau, reported by the *San Antonio Express-News* in September 2000, Texas concealed handgun license holders were 14 times less likely than the non-license holders to commit a crime of any kind and five times less likely to commit a violent crime. The SGFS essay mentions murder as one of the crimes for which Texas concealed handgun license holders were arrested during the course of the VPC study, but the essay fails to mention that in the first ten years of Texas's concealed handgun licensing program (during which time over a quarter of a million concealed handgun licenses were issued), only eight Texas concealed handgun license holders were convicted of murder. As of January 1, 2007, no Texas concealed handgun license holder had ever been convicted of *capital* murder. The discrepancy between arrests and convictions is caused, in large part, by the way law enforcement officers respond to a self-defense shooting. If the facts of a self-defense shooting are not immediately evident, a shooter who acted within the letter of the law may still be arrested for murder and held until investigators are able to sort out the sequence of events.

The SGFS essay concludes its attack on the integrity of concealed handgun license holders by pointing to a 2007 investigation by the *Florida Sun-Sentinel* that purportedly found more than 1,400 convicted felons in possession of Florida concealed handgun licenses. Though the Florida licensing system may have a few cracks in its screening process, the cracks appear to be relatively minor. Those 1,400 convicted felons constitute only about 0.1% of all Florida concealed handgun license holders. And the cracks apparently aren't causing problems. Statistics show that Florida concealed handgun license holders are still significantly less likely than non-license holders to commit violent crimes. In fact, according to Florida state agencies, you are more than twice as likely to be attacked by an alligator than by a concealed handgun license holder in the state of Florida.

The truth is that possessing a concealed handgun license and/or having the right to legally carry a firearm does not enable a person to carry a gun or commit a crime. There are no checkpoints where officials screen for guns and check licenses. A person intent on carrying a gun can easily do so throughout modern American society, including on college campuses,

regardless of whether or not he or she is licensed to do so. An individual engaged in criminal activity is typically not concerned with the prospect of committing a misdemeanor (carrying a concealed handgun without a license) on his or her way to commit a felony (armed robbery, assault, rape, murder, etc).

5) CONCEALED CARRY PERMIT HOLDERS ARE NOT REQUIRED TO HAVE LAW ENFORCEMENT TRAINING BECAUSE THEY'RE NOT LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

For its final argument, the essay points out, “Concealed carry permit holders are not required to have law enforcement training.” This is true. Concealed carry permit holders are not required to have law enforcement training because they are not law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers do not go through academy training to learn to carry concealed handguns for self-defense; they go through academy training to learn to be law enforcement officers. Concealed handgun license holders have no need of most of the training received by law enforcement officers. Concealed handgun license holders don't need to know how to drive police cars at high speeds or how to kick down doors or how to conduct traffic stops or how to make arrests or how to use handcuffs. And concealed handgun license holders definitely don't need to spend weeks memorizing radio codes and traffic laws.

Contrary to what SGFS and other opponents of concealed carry might claim, concealed handgun license holders don't need extensive tactical training because they are not charged with protecting the public. Concealed handgun license holders don't go looking for bad guys—it's not their job to act like amateur, one-man SWAT teams. All a concealed handgun license holder needs to know is how to use his or her concealed handgun to stop an immediate threat of death or serious bodily harm. That type of training can be accomplished in the one-day training courses required to obtain a concealed handgun license in most states.

The SGFS essay accurately points out that police officers in the field typically hit their intended targets approximately 25% of the time. What it fails to point out is that police officers frequently encounter scenarios that a concealed handgun license holder would never encounter. License holders do not chase bad guys down dark alleys or raid drug labs or engage in standoffs with criminals barricaded inside buildings. According to experts on the issue, most self-defense shootings occur at close range and are over in a matter of seconds.

Interestingly enough, law enforcement officers in most states are only required to requalify with their weapons once a year, and in some states, such as Texas, the requalification test for law enforcement officers varies very little from the shooting test that must be passed by concealed handgun license applicants.

Not surprisingly, the SGFS essay presents the typical farfetched scenarios of self-defense shootings resulting in “collateral damage” and of multiple students drawing weapons and finding themselves unable to identify the actual “shooter” in prolonged shootouts. This ignores both the findings of a 1997 FBI study*** that concluded that most shootouts last less than ten seconds and the fact that the rate of concealed carry among individuals in their twenties is typically about one half of one percent. How nine seconds of exchanged gunfire between two armed individuals could possibly lead to greater loss of life than a nine-minute, uncontested execution-style massacre, such as the one that occurred at Virginia Tech, is something Students for Gun Free

Schools, like most opponents of concealed carry on campus, doesn't attempt to explain. Likewise, they make no attempt to explain how one of these brief shootouts could lead to multiple students drawing their weapons and losing track of the shooter, when statistically speaking, only about one out of every 200 students would be armed. Given the fact that even a huge 400-seat lecture hall would statistically contain only two students with concealed handgun licenses, the chance of one of those armed students losing track of the actual shooter during a few seconds of exchanged gunfire is highly unlikely.

Students for Gun Free Schools concludes its essay by suggesting that the relatively small number of justified shooting deaths each year somehow proves that concealed carry is ineffective. Like many opponents of concealed carry, they fail to realize that the key factor is not the number of bad guys killed but, rather, the number of good guys saved. According to a 1991 FBI study****, less than one out of a thousand lawful defensive uses of a firearm results in the death of the attacker. By that estimate, firearms are used almost five times more frequently to save lives than to take lives in the U.S.

In the end, Students for Gun Free Schools' arguments against concealed carry on campus, like all arguments against concealed carry on campus, rely entirely on speculation, false assumptions, and emotion. Most college campuses in America are surrounded by neighborhoods where concealed handgun license holders, including college students, lawfully carry concealed handguns at movie theaters, grocery stores, shopping malls, office buildings, restaurants, churches, banks, etc. Yet, we don't hear of spates of accidental discharges or alcohol-fueled shootings by licensees in those places. If the majority of college campuses are safer than their surrounding areas because they don't allow concealed carry on campus, why don't we see higher crime rates at the twelve U.S. colleges that do allow concealed carry on campus? After a combined total of one hundred semesters, why haven't we seen any negative results on those twelve campuses? There is absolutely no verifiable evidence to suggest that allowing concealed carry on college campuses makes campuses any less safe; therefore, reason dictates that current school policies and state laws against concealed carry on campus serve only to stack the odds in favor of dangerous criminals who have no regard for school policy or state law. SCCC simply seeks to take the advantage away from those who seek to harm the innocent.

SCCC

Better armed because we're armed with knowledge and guns!

* "Crime, Deterrence, and Right-to-Carry Concealed Handguns," John Lott and David Mustard, *Journal of Legal Studies* (v.26, no.1, pages 1-68, January 1997); "An Analysis of the Arrest Rate of Texas Concealed Handgun License Holders as Compared to the Arrest Rate of the Entire Texas Population," William E. Sturdevant, September 1, 2000; Florida Department of Justice statistics, 1998; Florida Department of State, "Concealed Weapons/Firearms License Statistical Report," 1998; Texas Department of Public Safety and the U.S. Census Bureau, reported in *San Antonio Express-News*, September 2000; Texas Department of Corrections data, 1996-2000, compiled by the Texas State Rifle Association

** A comparison of statistics on arrests of police officers, published by the Washington Post on 08/28/94, to Florida Department of Law Enforcement statistics submitted to the Governor on 03/15/95.

*** "In The Line of Fire: Violence Against Law Enforcement," U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Institute of Justice, 1997

**** "Critical Incidents in Policing," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1991