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A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE GUN DIVIDE IN AMERICA

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Abstract

Americans are divided on how to solve the problem of gun violence in the United States. We propose that the divisions reflect underlying differences in perceptions of the role that guns play in satisfying the need for safety. Whereas some people perceive guns as a means to safety and regard gun restrictions as a threat to safety, other people perceive guns as a threat to safety and regard gun restrictions as essential for safety. Support for our proposition comes from a survey of students, faculty, and staff at a large, southeastern university on attitudes and judgments regarding campus carry—the movement to legalize the concealed carry of guns on college campuses. We distinguished between respondents ($N = 11,390$) who (a) own a gun for protection, (b) own a gun exclusively for reasons other than protection (e.g., collecting, sports), and (c) do not own a gun. Protection owners, who are inclined to perceive guns as means to safety, estimated that gun crimes on campus would decrease if campus carry were legal, reported that they and others would feel safer if the respondent carried a concealed gun, and supported campus carry legislation campus. Non-owners and non-protection gun owners, who are inclined to perceive guns as a threat to safety felt the reverse on all counts. The two groups converged in reports of how safe they would feel having a heated interaction. Most participants reported they currently felt safe having heated interactions, but would feel less safe if campus carry was legal. Nevertheless, the difference was stronger for non-owners and non-protection gun owners than for protection gun owners. Our findings have policy implications and suggest that solving America's gun problem requires approaches that balance the safety needs of people who view guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety.

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INTRODUCTION

Americans have a gun problem. The Center for Disease Control reports that 39,773 people died from firearm-related injuries in 2017.¹ As evident in Figure 1, the yearly death rate by firearm is steady, hovering around 10.4 deaths per 100,000 people until the last three years when the number increased to 11.3 in 2015, 12.0 in 2016, and 12.2 in 2017, the latest year for which data are available.² These numbers are sobering when compared to the firearm death rate in other high-income countries, which on average report one firearm death per 100,000 people each year.³ For example, comparing country-level population statistics⁴ with country-level firearm deaths statistics reveals a firearm death rate per 100,000 people of 2.33 in France,⁵ 1.05 in Germany,⁶ and 0.20 in the United Kingdom.⁷

1. Kenneth D. Kochanek et al., *Deaths: Final Data for 2017*, 68 NAT'L VITAL STAT. REP., no. 9, June 24, 2019, at 12.

2. See *infra* Figure 1.

3. Erin Grinshteyn & David Hemenway, *Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010*, 129 AM. J. MED. 266, 269 (2016).

4. *World Population Clock: 7.7 Billion People (2019)*, WORLDMETERS, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/> (last visited Sept. 19, 2019).

5. *France — Gun Facts, Figures and the Law*, GUNPOLICY.ORG, <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/france> (last visited Sept. 19, 2019).

6. *Germany — Gun Facts, Figures and the Law*, GUNPOLICY.ORG, <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/germany> (last visited Sept. 18, 2019).

7. *United Kingdom — Gun Facts, Figures and the Law*, GUNPOLICY.ORG, <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/united-kingdom> (last visited Sept. 18, 2019).

While Americans likely agree that America has a gun violence problem, they disagree on the solution to the problem.⁸ For example, despite its collaborative-sounding name, the Bipartisan Background Check Act of 2019 received unanimous support from Democrats in the United States House of Representatives, yet almost no support from Republicans.⁹ In addition, events such as mass shootings elicit opposing responses, with some people arguing for increasing restrictions on firearms (e.g., background checks, increased gun-purchase waiting periods, and bans on military-style semi-automatic rifle assault weapons and certain firearm accessories, such as bump stocks and silencers) and other people arguing for reducing restrictions on firearms (e.g., arming teachers and legalizing campus carry).¹⁰

The question is, why can Americans and their political representatives not unite to design policies that decrease gun violence. Although this question likely has many answers, we take a distinctly psychological approach. Psychologists are poorly represented among gun researchers, who are largely from areas such as criminology, sociology, public health, and epidemiology. Although psychologists have long held an interest in aggressive behavior¹¹, few have investigated gun violence. But psychologists—who study psychological processes such as needs, motivations, attitudes, and expectations—have insights to offer in understanding America’s gun problem, insights that potentially could lead to new approaches to reducing gun violence.

In this Article, we propose that all people share a fundamental need for safety. However, they differ in their perceptions of the role guns play in satisfying that need. We describe the need for safety and how it eventuates in different perceptions of guns. We then describe findings from our research on support for campus carry—legislation that would allow people with a concealed carry license to carry a concealed firearm on college campuses. The debate surrounding campus carry is an

8. See, e.g., Press Release, Quinnipiac U. Poll, U.S. Voters Back Dem Plan To Reopen Government 2-1, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; More U.S. Voters Say Trump TV Address Was Misleading 4–6 (Jan. 14, 2019), <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2592> [hereinafter Quinnipiac U. Poll].

9. 165 CONG. REC. H2263 (daily ed. Feb. 27, 2019).

10. See Kim Parker et al., *America’s Complex Relationship with Guns: An In-Depth Look at the Attitudes and Experiences of U.S. Adults*, PEW RES. CTR., June 22, 2017, at 11–12.

11. See generally Craig A. Anderson, & Brad J. Bushman, *Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature*, 12 PSYCHOL. SCI. 353 (2001); Kellina M. Craig, *Examining Hate-Motivated Aggression: A Review of the Social Psychological Literature on Hate Crimes as a Distinct Form of Aggression*, 7 AGGRESSION & VIOLENT BEHAV. 85 (2002); Alice H. Eagly & Valerie J. Steffen, *Gender and Aggressive Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Social Psychological Literature*, 100 PSYCHOL. BULL. 309 (1986).

excellent forum for studying America's gun problem because so many state legislatures have considered legalizing campus carry in the recent past, and because the debate surrounding campus carry exemplifies the opposing views that Americans have about guns. Our findings illustrate how different perceptions of guns are strongly linked to expectations about how guns will affect safety and gun violence, and support for gun policy. We conclude with speculations on the policy implications of taking a safety-needs approach to addressing America's gun problem.

I. GUNS AND THE NEED FOR SAFETY

Seventy years ago, Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs that underlies much of human behavior.¹² The needs range from basic, physiological needs such as food, air, and sex, to higher order needs such as esteem needs and the need for realizing one's potential (i.e., self-actualization).¹³ Among the more basic needs that Maslow proposed was a need for safety—the need to feel safe and secure.¹⁴ Safety shapes how people think, feel, and behave¹⁵ and is important to psychological well-being.¹⁶ Other research suggests that the need for safety is closely linked to biology and has an evolutionary function.¹⁷ Organisms that are better equipped to maintain safety and avoid harm are more likely to survive.¹⁸

According to Maslow, all people share the fundamental need for safety.¹⁹ We agree and believe that all Americans can unite around the need to feel safe. People need to feel that their homes, schools, and places of work are safe, and more generally, that their children, family, friends—all Americans—are safe. Where Americans are divided, however, is in their beliefs about the role of guns in fulfilling the need for safety.²⁰ Some Americans perceive guns as a means to safety. They feel safer when armed²¹ and regard gun restrictions as a threat to their safety.²² Other

12. Abraham H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, 50 *PSYCHOL. REV.* 370, 375 (1943).

13. *Id.* at 372–82.

14. *Id.* at 376.

15. Douglas T. Kenrick et al., *Goal-Driven Cognition and Functional Behavior: The Fundamental-Motives Framework*, 19 *CURRENT DIRECTIONS PSYCHOL. SCI.* 63, 64–65 (2010).

16. See Joshua Hart, *The Psychology of Defensiveness*, in *HANDBOOK OF PERSONAL SECURITY* 75, 75 (Patrick J. Carroll et al. eds., 2015).

17. Geerat J. Vermeij, *Security, Unpredictability, and Evolution: Policy and the History of Life*, in *NATURAL SECURITY TO A DANGEROUS WORLD* 25, 25–29 (Raphael D. Sagarin & Terence Taylor, eds. 2008).

18. See *id.*

19. Maslow, *supra* note 12, at 375.

20. Matthew Miller et al., *Community Firearms, Community Fear*, 11 *EPIDEMIOLOGY* 709, 710–11 (2000).

21. *Id.*

22. Paula D. McClain, *Firearms Ownership, Gun Control Attitudes, and Neighborhood Environment*, 5 *LAW & POL'Y Q.* 299, 308 (1983).

Americans perceive guns—even guns carried legally—as a threat to safety. They believe that guns impair safety,²³ feel unsafe when others around them are armed, and regard gun restrictions as essential to ensuring public safety.²⁴

The different views of guns—as a means to safety versus threat to safety—likely correspond with people’s reasons for gun ownership. Gun-owners, on average, are more likely than non-owners to regard gun restrictions as a threat to their safety²⁵ and to support legislation that reduces gun restrictions.²⁶ Moreover, two-thirds of gun owners report that they purchased or own a gun for personal protection.²⁷ Conversely, one-third of gun-owners cited reasons other than protection as a major reason for owning a gun.²⁸ In fact, people own guns for many reasons besides protection including collection and sport.²⁹ We assert that, among gun owners, the motivation for owning a gun is centrally important in determining whether one views guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety, and one’s support for gun legislation.

II. THE CONSEQUENCES OF DIFFERENT SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

We explored how perceptions of guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety affect support for gun policy, and a variety of other outcomes, in a sample of over 11,000 members of the university community at the University of Florida.³⁰ We described to our participants pending legislation that, if passed, would allow people with a concealed carry license to carry a concealed firearm on their college campus.³¹ We then asked our sample whether they supported legislation that would legalize campus carry on their campus.³² We also asked participants to estimate the number of gun crimes that occurred on their campus in the last 12 months and how many gun crimes would occur on

23. See D. Hemenway et al., *National Attitudes Concerning Gun Carrying in the United States*, 7 *INJ. PREVENTION* 282, 282–83 (2001).

24. See *id.* at 284–85. See generally David Hemenway et al., *Is an Armed Society a Polite Society? Guns and Road Rage*, 38 *ACCIDENT ANALYSIS & PREVENTION* 687 (2006) (discussing the link between gun ownership and road rage).

25. See McClain, *supra* note 22, at 318.

26. Parker et al., *supra* note 10, at 65.

27. Parker et al., *supra* note 10, at 8, 17, 20; Joseph Wertz et al., *Differences Between New and Long-Standing US Gun Owners: Results From a National Survey*, 108 *AM. J. PUB. HEALTH* 871, 874 (2018).

28. See Parker et al., *supra* note 10, at 17.

29. See Parker et al., *supra* note 10, at 21.

30. James A. Shepperd et al., *The Anticipated Consequences of Legalizing Guns on College Campuses*, 5 *J. THREAT ASSESSMENT MGMT.* 21, 24–25 (2018) [hereinafter Shepperd et al. 2018a]; James A. Shepperd et al., *Gun Attitudes on Campus: United and Divided by Safety Needs*, 158 *J. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 616, 618 (2018) [hereinafter Shepperd et al. 2018b].

31. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

32. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

their campus in the next 12 months if campus carry became legal.³³ Finally, we asked questions about how safe they currently felt and questions about how safe they would feel if campus carry became legal on their campus.³⁴ Our sample was generally representative of the campus as whole,³⁵ and the University of Florida is likely similar to other large public universities. Thus, our findings likely generalize to other, similar universities.

To distinguish between people who perceive guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety, we asked our sample whether they owned a gun, and if so, why they owned a gun.³⁶ We classified participants who reported not owning a gun as *non-owners*, and assumed that they were inclined to perceive guns as a threat to safety.³⁷ Non-owners represented the largest portion of our sample, accounting for 73.7% of participants in the survey.³⁸ We asked participants who reported owning a gun why they owned a gun and provided several choices: protection of self, protection of others, recreation, etc., allowing people to select more than one reason.³⁹ We classified participants as *protection owners* if they indicated they owned a gun for protecting themselves or others irrespective of what other reasons they selected.⁴⁰ We classified participants as *non-protection owners* if they exclusively indicated they owned a gun for non-protection reasons.⁴¹ Protection owners and non-protection owners accounted for 21.4% and 5.0% of our sample respectively.⁴² We assumed that protection owners were inclined to view guns as a source of safety and that non-owners and non-protection owners were inclined to view guns as a threat to safety, a finding we confirmed in subsequent research.⁴³

Responses to our survey revealed that gun safety perceptions—in terms of gun ownership group—were closely tied to people’s support for campus carry,⁴⁴ their perceptions of how safe they would feel,⁴⁵ and the downstream consequences for the academic experience if campus carry

33. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

34. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

35. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

36. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

37. See J. Losee et al., *Understanding Politically Divergent Views: A Study of Gun Perceptions in the U.S.* (2019) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with the University of Florida).

38. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 619.

39. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

40. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

41. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

42. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 619.

43. See Losee et al., *supra* note 37.

44. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 621 fig.1.

45. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

became legal in their state.⁴⁶ We briefly describe some of our central findings.

A. *Estimated Gun Crime*

We asked participants to estimate the number of gun-related crimes that occurred on their campus in the last 12 months and the number of gun-related crimes that would occur on their campus in the next 12 months if campus carry became legal. Because frequency data is typically skewed, we present here the median rather than the mean responses to the two questions. However, the pattern was the same when we analyzed the mean responses.⁴⁷ Figure 2 presents gun crime estimates by group.⁴⁸ As evident from the left side of the figure, the groups did not differ in their estimates of current crime, with all three estimating four to five gun crimes over the last 12 months (the actual number was one).⁴⁹ Where respondents differed, was in their estimates of the number of gun crimes that would occur in the next 12 months if campus carry were legal.⁵⁰ The median responses indicated that respondents who did not own a gun or who owned a gun exclusively for non-protection reasons estimated that crime would double if guns were legal on campus.⁵¹ By contrast, and consistent with our argument that protection owners view guns as a source of safety, respondents who owned guns for protection reasons estimated a decrease in gun crimes on campus if campus carry were legal.⁵²

These findings support our central argument regarding the divergent perspectives on guns and safety. In the eyes of protection owners, who view guns as a means to safety, the path to a safer campus—and presumably a safer world—entails increasing the availability of guns, particularly among people who have completed the requisite training to receive a concealed-carry license.⁵³ The fact that they estimated that gun crimes on campus would decrease if campus carry were legal suggests they believe that the presence of licensed gun owners on campus with concealed weapons would deter gun crime. In the eyes of non-owners and non-protection owners, who view guns as a threat to safety, allowing people to carry guns on campus is a path to greater danger in the form of greater gun crime on campus.⁵⁴ Their estimates that gun crimes on

46. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 28–30.

47. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 621–22.

48. *See infra* Figure 2. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

49. *See infra* Figure 2. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

50. *See infra* Figure 2. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

51. *See infra* Figure 2. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

52. *See infra* Figure 2. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

53. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622–23.

54. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 623.

campus would increase suggests that they believe the increase in crime will come from people with concealed carry licenses. However, it is also possible that in answering the question, they thought not about who would carry a gun, but instead about the effect of allowing guns in a place where they are currently restricted.

B. *Feelings of Safety*

The extent to which people feel safe affects their behavior. Feeling unsafe increases feelings of anxiety.⁵⁵ We asked our sample: (1) how safe they currently feel on their campus; (2) how safe would they feel if they legally carried a concealed (not visible) gun on their college campus; (3) how safe they would feel if other people legally carried a concealed gun on their college campus; and (4) how safe other people would feel if they (the respondent) legally carried a concealed gun on their college campus.⁵⁶ Our sample responded to these items using a five-step scale (1 = not at all safe; 2 = somewhat unsafe; 3 = neither safe nor unsafe; 4 = somewhat safe; 5 = very safe).⁵⁷

Figure 3 presents the percent of respondents who selected either 4 or 5 to the four questions.⁵⁸ As evidenced by the first set of columns, most of our respondents reported that they currently felt safe on their campus.⁵⁹ To be sure, the protection gun owners reported feeling less safe currently than did the non-protection gun owners and the non-owners.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, over 60% of all three groups reported that they currently felt safe on their campus.⁶¹ The remaining three columns present how the three groups predicted they would feel if campus carry were legal.⁶² Protection gun owners reported that they and other people would feel safer if campus carry were legal and they (the respondent) carried a concealed gun on campus.⁶³ Protection gun owners reported they would feel safer if others legally carried a concealed gun on campus.⁶⁴ Although this finding may seem surprising at first, it likely reflects the fact that many of the protection gun-owners likely assumed that they also would carry a concealed gun on campus when responding to this question. Non-

55. Jos F. Brosschot, et al., *The Default Response to Uncertainty and the Importance of Perceived Safety in Anxiety and Stress: An Evolution-Theoretical Perspective*, 41 J. ANXIETY DISORDERS 22, 24 (2016).

56. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

57. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

58. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

59. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

60. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

61. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

62. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

63. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

64. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

protection gun owners and non-owners felt just the opposite.⁶⁵ They reported that they and others would feel less safe if they (the respondent) legally carried a concealed gun on campus.⁶⁶ They also reported that they would feel less safe if others legally carried a concealed gun on campus.⁶⁷

Once again, these findings are consistent with our argument that the groups differ in their perspective on how guns are related to safety. Protection gun owners, who likely perceive guns as a means to safety, reported feeling less safe (albeit not unsafe) than the other groups currently and reported that they and others would feel safer, if the respondent personally carried a concealed gun on campus.⁶⁸ In contrast, the majority of non-protection gun owners and non-owners, who likely perceive guns as a threat to safety, reported that they currently felt safe on their campus, but would feel unsafe if campus carry was legal and they or others legally carried a concealed gun on campus.⁶⁹

C. *Feelings of Safety in Heated Interactions*

Heated interactions are a normal part of life. However, heated interactions can potentially turn deadly if one or more of the parties to the interaction is armed. We asked our sample two questions about safety and having heated interactions on campus.⁷⁰ First, we asked how safe they currently felt having a heated interaction on their campus.⁷¹ Second, we asked how safe they would feel having a heated interaction on campus if licensed people were legally allowed to carry a concealed gun on campus.⁷² Respondents answered these questions using the same five-step scale described earlier.⁷³ Because heated interactions have the potential to make people feel unsafe, we focused on the proportion of participants who reported they would feel unsafe having heated interactions (i.e., answering 1 or 2 in response to the items).

Figure 4 presents the percentage of respondents who stated they currently felt unsafe having heated interactions on campus and the percentage of respondents who reported they would feel unsafe having a heated interaction on campus if people with a concealed carry license could carry a concealed gun on campus.⁷⁴ The left side of Figure 4 reveals that, regardless of the group, fewer than 20% of respondents currently felt

65. See *infra* Figure 3. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

66. See *infra* Figure 3. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

67. See *infra* Figure 3. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

68. See *infra* Figure 3. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

69. See *infra* Figure 3. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

70. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 25.

71. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 25.

72. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 25.

73. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 25.

74. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

unsafe having heated interactions.⁷⁵ The right side of Figure 4 reveals that respondents reported they would feel quite differently if campus carry were legal.⁷⁶ The most extreme difference in these responses occurred for non-owners and non-protection owners. More than 80% of respondents in both groups reported that they would feel unsafe having heated interactions if campus carry were legal.⁷⁷ Importantly, the number of protection owners who reported that they would feel unsafe having heated interactions also increased from 14.6% to 35.8% if campus carry was legal, although this increase was less than that reported among the other two groups.⁷⁸

This final finding is intriguing and suggests limits on the extent to which protection owners view guns as a source of safety. Almost certainly, and understandably, protection owners feel safer when they are armed but not necessarily safer when others are armed, particularly in situations that could escalate dangerously. More to the point, this final finding also suggests that although protection owners view guns as a source of safety, they also recognize that removing gun restrictions can decrease their feeling of safety in certain situations. Alternatively, protection owners may have not considered, until confronted with a real-world example, certain negative consequences of legalizing concealed carry on campus.

It is noteworthy that we also asked the instructors (participants that reported being responsible for evaluating students) in our sample questions about how safe they would feel evaluating a student if campus carry were legal.⁷⁹ The findings from these items were quite similar to other findings we have reported.⁸⁰ Although almost no instructor, regardless of gun-ownership group, reported feeling unsafe evaluating students currently, many—particularly instructors who were non-owners or non-protection owners—reported that they would feel unsafe evaluating students if campus carry became legal.⁸¹

D. *Support for Campus Carry*

So far, we have discussed how perceptions of guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety are linked to estimates of gun crime and feelings of safety. People's crime estimates and feelings of safety are important because they shape attitudes and behavior. For example, perceptions of crime and safety undoubtedly influence decisions about

75. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

76. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

77. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

78. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

79. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 26–28 tbls. 3 & 4.

80. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 26–28 tbls. 3 & 4.

81. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 26–28 tbls. 3 & 4.

what people eat and drink, whether they should buy alarm systems or other security devices for their homes, whether they lock their car doors, when and where they go after dark, and how and where they choose to go in general.⁸² Yet, perhaps more important is how these perceptions translate into policy positions, because policies can influence the entire population and not just the people who favor a policy.

We found that perceiving guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety—in terms of gun ownership group—also influenced support for campus carry legislation.⁸³ As evident in Figure 5, respondents differed dramatically by group in their support for legislation that would legalize campus carry.⁸⁴ Respondents who did not own a gun strongly opposed campus carry (78.7% opposed versus 15.9% supported).⁸⁵ Conversely, participants who owned a gun for protection reasons strongly supported campus carry (15.1% opposed versus 80.3% supported).⁸⁶ The important group, however, comprised respondents who owned guns for non-protection reasons. They more closely resembled the non-owners than protection owners in their support for campus carry (62.7% opposed versus 31.5% supported).⁸⁷ These findings illustrate that perceiving guns as a source of safety translates to support for legislation that broadens gun rights, whereas perceiving guns as a threat to safety translates to opposition to such legislation. It also illustrates that not all gun owners are cut from the same cloth. Researchers would do well to assess why people own guns, or more importantly, whether gun-owners see guns as a means versus a threat to safety.

E. *The Need for Future Research*

Although our findings provide evidence that a psychological approach to the gun divide that distinguishes between people who view guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety has merit, we need more research in several areas. First, we examined people's expectations of how safe they would feel having a heated interaction if campus carry were legal.⁸⁸ Yet, these expectations may stray far from how people would actually feel in such situations. Second, our groups differed dramatically in their estimates of the effect of campus carry on gun crime.⁸⁹ Yet, it is unknown what effect campus carry would actually have on gun crimes. Given that

82. See generally Brosschot, et al., *supra* note 55.

83. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620–21 fig.1.

84. See *infra* Figure 5. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620–21 fig.1.

85. See *infra* Figure 5. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620–21 fig.1.

86. See *infra* Figure 5. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620–21 fig.1.

87. See *infra* Figure 5. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620–21 fig.1.

88. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

89. See *infra* Figure 2. See also Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

gun crime on college campuses is already quite low,⁹⁰ it seems unlikely that legalizing campus carry would reduce gun crimes.

Third, we examined responses of people at only one university.⁹¹ Although we have reason to believe that our findings will generalize elsewhere, the findings deserve replication. Fourth, our study was limited to a single topic in the gun debate: allowing concealed carry on a college campus.⁹² It remains to be seen whether our findings would replicate to other topics in the gun debate such as waiting periods for gun purchases, allowing teachers to carry guns in K–12 schools, creating a federal database to track gun sales, banning assault-style weapons, and banning high capacity magazines and certain firearm accessories. Fifth, our measure of gun perceptions (viewing guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety) was based on whether people own a gun and the reason for owning a gun among gun owners.⁹³ In recently collected data, we showed that people's perceptions of guns as a means to safety versus a threat to safety correspond closely with the gun ownership group.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, our findings deserve replication using a direct measure rather than proxy measure of gun perceptions.

F. Summary

Protection gun owners, who likely perceive guns as a means to safety, supported legalizing campus carry and estimated that gun crimes on campus would decrease if campus carry were legalized.⁹⁵ They also reported that they and others would feel safer if the respondent carried a concealed gun on campus.⁹⁶ Non-protection gun owners and non-owners, who likely perceive guns as a threat to safety, opposed legalizing campus carry⁹⁷ and estimated that crimes on campus would increase if campus carry were legal.⁹⁸ Unlike protection owners, they reported that they and others would feel less safe if they (the respondent) carried a concealed gun on campus.⁹⁹ In general, most of our participants reported currently feeling safe having heated interactions on campus and would feel less

90. *Gunfire on School Grounds in the United States*, EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY, <https://everytownresearch.org/gunfire-in-school/#ns> (last visited Sept. 22, 2019).

91. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 24–25; Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

92. Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 24–25; Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 618.

93. Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 617.

94. Losec et al., *supra* note 37.

95. *See infra* Figure 2. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

96. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

97. *See infra* Figure 5. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620–21 fig.1.

98. *See infra* Figure 2. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622 tbl.3.

99. *See infra* Figure 3. *See also* Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 620 tbl.2.

safe having heated interactions on campus if campus carry were legal.¹⁰⁰ However, far more non-protection gun owners and non-owners than protection gun owners reported they would feel unsafe having heated interactions if campus carry were legal.¹⁰¹

Collectively, these findings confirm our argument that people who are inclined to perceive guns as a means to safety (i.e., protection owners) support efforts to remove gun restrictions and generally expect that removing restrictions will increase safety, albeit within limits. The limit is that they recognize that they would feel less safe under certain circumstances, e.g., having a heated interaction, if concealed guns were allowed on campus than if they were not. Conversely, people inclined to perceive guns as a threat to safety (i.e., non-protection gun owners and non-owners) oppose efforts to remove gun restrictions and believe that such efforts will decrease safety.

III. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our survey, like many others before it, revealed that the vast majority of students, faculty, and staff oppose campus carry.¹⁰² This finding should come as no surprise. Our findings suggest that collectively, non-protection gun owners and non-owners represent most of the people who comprise higher education communities and they are the very people who are most inclined to view guns as a threat to safety. Other evidence reveals that college campuses are relatively safe places, particularly when compared with the surrounding communities.¹⁰³ Campus carry legislation appears to propose a solution to a problem that is nearly non-existent. Moreover, we know of no clear evidence that institutions that allow campus carry are safer (i.e., experience fewer gun crimes) than institutions that do not.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, state legislators continue to

100. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

101. See *infra* Figure 4. See also Shepperd et al. 2018a, *supra* note 30, at 27 fig.1.

102. Katherine Bennett et al., *University Faculty Attitudes Toward Guns on Campus*, 23 J. CRIM. JUST. EDUC. 336, 350 (2012); Michael R. Cavanaugh et al., *Student Attitudes Toward Concealed Handguns on Campus at 2 Universities*, 102 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 2245, 2246 (2012); D. Hemenway et al., *supra* note 23, at 283; Ryan Patten et al., *Packing Heat: Attitudes Regarding Concealed Weapons on College Campuses*, 38 AM. J. CRIM. JUST. 551, 559–60 (2013); Shepperd et al. 2018b, *supra* note 30, at 622; Amy Thompson et al., *Faculty Perceptions and Practices Regarding Carrying Concealed Handguns on University Campuses*, 38 J. COMMUNITY HEALTH 366, 368 (2013); Amy Thompson et al., *Student Perceptions and Practices Regarding Carrying Concealed Handguns on University Campuses*, 61 J. AM. C. HEALTH 243, 247 (2013).

103. J. Fredericks Volkwein et al., *The Relationship of Campus Crime to Campus and Student Characteristics*, 36 RES. IN HIGHER EDUC., 647, 666 (1995).

104. See, e.g., Florian Martin, *Two Years After Campus Carry Took Effect, Has Anything Changed?*, HOUS. PUB. MEDIA (Sept. 27, 2018, 6:40 AM), <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/in-depth/2018/09/27/305798/two-years-after-campus-carry-took-effect-has-anything-changed/> (discussing how two years after Texas' campus carry law was implemented, there has not been any effect on safety, positive or negative, at the University of Houston).

introduce bills to legalize campus carry—with several recent successes. In the past five years, between 2015 and 2019, six states have made it legal to carry concealed guns on college campuses or have expanded campus carry rights: Texas in 2015; Tennessee and Ohio in 2016; and Arkansas, Georgia, and Kansas in 2017.¹⁰⁵

If legislators are determined to legalize the carry of concealed weapons on campus despite the overwhelming opposition from the people who will be most affected by the legislation (i.e., campus community members), they must address the safety concerns of people who perceive guns as a threat to safety and not only the needs of people who perceive guns as a means to safety. After all, while people who perceive guns as a source of safety feel safer when they are armed, people who perceive guns as a threat to safety feel less safe when others are armed. Addressing the concerns of people who consider guns a threat to safety might include limiting concealed carry to people who have an “enhanced” concealed carry license that requires additional firearm training, as in Arkansas,¹⁰⁶ Idaho,¹⁰⁷ and Mississippi.¹⁰⁸ It might also include provisions regarding who can carry a concealed weapon on college campuses. For example, Tennessee only allows full-time employees who have notified law enforcement that they intend to carry concealed weapons to do so, while students and the general public are not allowed to carry concealed weapons on campus.¹⁰⁹ It might also include provisions as to where on campuses concealed weapons are and are not allowed. For example, Georgia bans firearms from student housing and athletic events,¹¹⁰ and Tennessee bans firearms from hospitals and mental health facilities on campus, as well as from disciplinary and job performance meetings.¹¹¹

It seems wise for state legislators to allow higher-education institutions the freedom to establish rules and regulations about where guns are allowed and stored on campus, as Texas does.¹¹² The dilemma regarding storage of guns on campus is a challenging issue. For instance, keeping a gun in a residence hall may make the gun available to others who lack firearm training or who are intent on self-harm. From our perspective, guns in residence halls potentially infringes on the safety concerns of residents who view guns as a threat to safety.

105. *Guns on Campus: Overview*, NAT'L CONF. OF ST. LEGISLATURES (Aug. 14, 2018), <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/guns-on-campus-overview.aspx>.

106. See ARK. CODE ANN. § 5-73-322(b), (g) (2019).

107. See IDAHO CODE § 18-3302K(4)(c) (2019).

108. See MISS. CODE ANN. § 97-37-7(2) (2019).

109. See TENN. CODE ANN. § 39-17-1309(e)(11) (2019).

110. GA. CODE ANN. § 16-11-127.1(c)(20)(A)(i) (2019).

111. TENN. CODE ANN. § 39-17-1309(e)(11)(C)(v) (2019).

112. TEX. GOV'T CODE ANN. § 411.2031(d) (West 2019).

CONCLUSION

We began with the observation that Americans have a gun violence problem. Gun violence is substantially higher in the United States than in all other high-income nations and appears to be increasing.¹¹³ And while most Americans likely agree that America has a gun violence problem, they disagree on the solution.¹¹⁴ We argue that all people share a fundamental need for safety but differ in their view of the role of guns in satisfying the need for safety. On one side of the gun debate are protection owners: people who view guns as a means to safety and favor legislation that supports gun rights. Our research reveals that people on this side of the debate perceive that gun crimes on their college campus would decrease if campus carry were legal and believe that they and others would feel safer if the respondent carried a concealed gun on campus. Although protection owners reported they would feel less safe having a heated interaction if campus carry were legal, they nevertheless voiced strong support for legalizing campus carry on college campuses. On the other side of the gun debate are non-protection and non-owners: people who view guns as a threat to safety and favor legislation that restricts gun rights. Our research reveals that this second group perceives that gun crimes on their college campus would decrease if concealed carry were legal, and believe that they and others would feel less safe if the respondent carried a concealed gun on campus. Finally, non-protection gun owners and non-owners reported that they would feel much less safe having a heated interaction if campus carry were legal and voiced strong opposition to legalizing concealed carry on college campuses.

We suspect that part of what contributes to the inability of Americans to unite in developing policies to reduce gun violence is a failure to recognize that people have different approaches to achieving the shared need for safety. Undoubtedly, many of the people who oppose, and many of the people who support gun restrictions believe that the other group is irrational in advocating for policies that so clearly—in each group's eyes—undermine safety. We argue that the inference of irrationality occurs because members of both groups fail to recognize the groups have different paths to satisfying the need for safety. Moreover, focusing exclusively on satisfying the safety needs of one group threatens the safety needs of the other group. All people need and deserve to feel safe. Solving America's gun problem requires policies that respect and strive to satisfy the safety needs of people who view guns as a means to safety and people who view guns as a threat to safety.

113. Grinshteyn & Hemenway, *supra* note 3, at 269.

114. *See* Quinnipiac U. Poll, *supra* note 8, at 4–6.

Figure 1

U.S. Firearm Deaths per 100,000 people

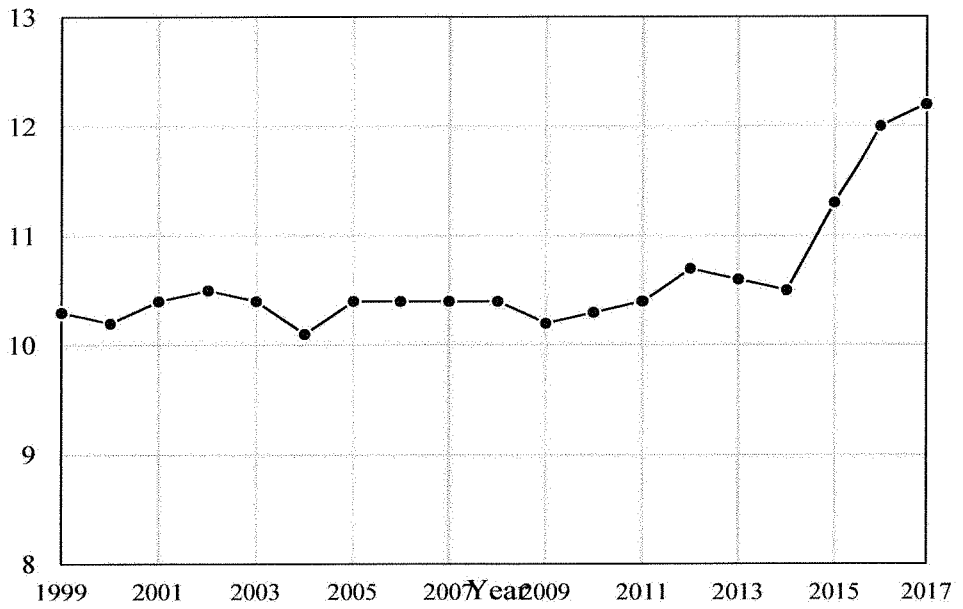


Figure 2

Median Estimated Gun Crime over 12 Months

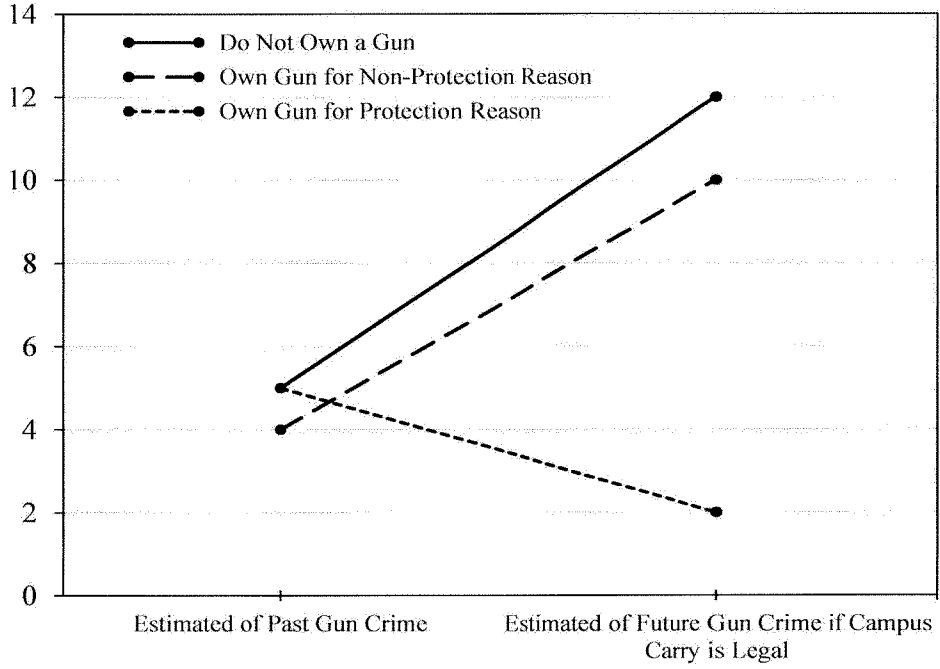


Figure 3

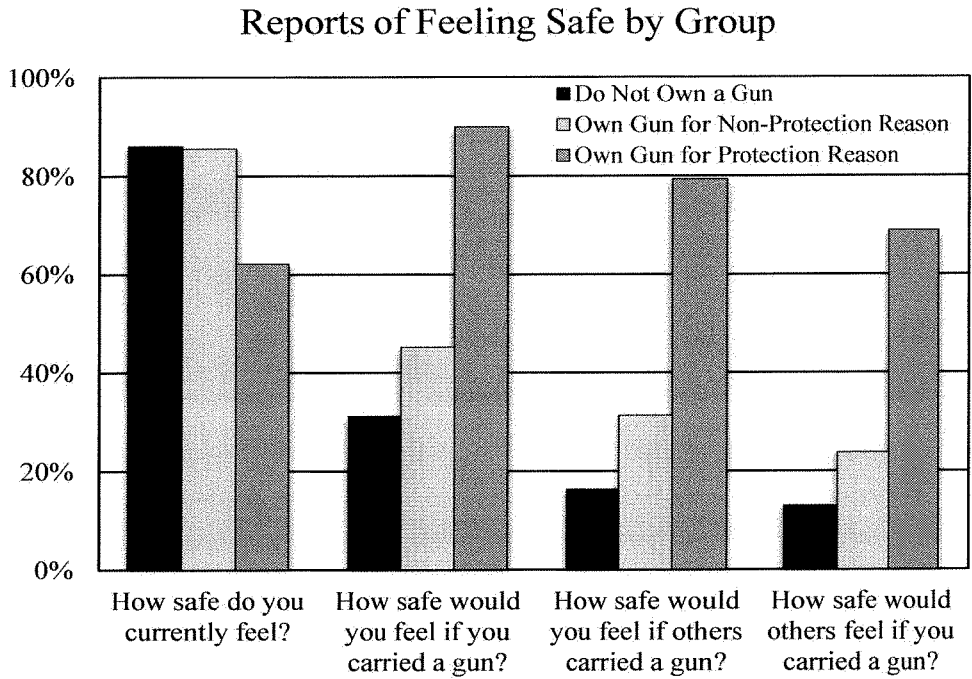


Figure 4

Feel Unsafe Having Heated Interactions

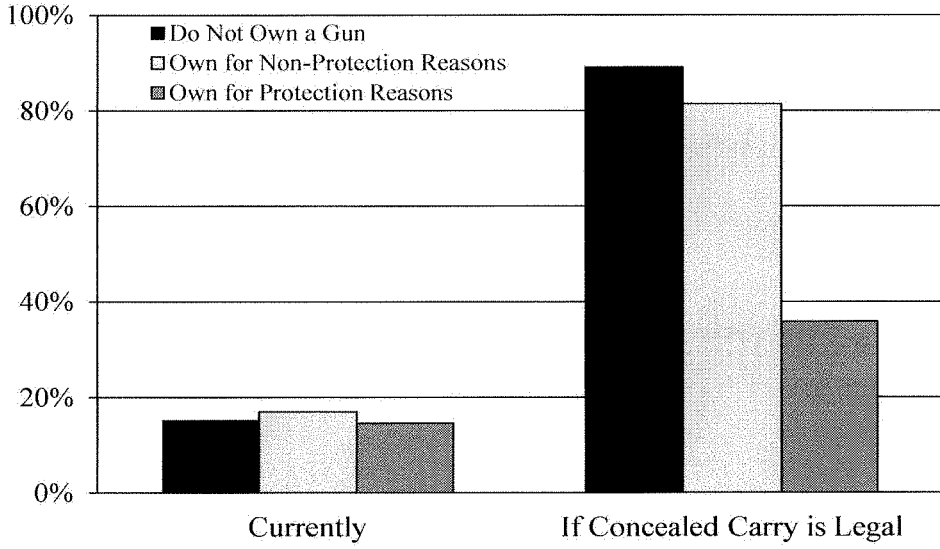


Figure 5

