

# University and College Officials' Perceptions of Open Carry on College Campus



**Aaron Bartula<sup>1</sup> and Kendra Bowen<sup>2</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In 2015, Texas joined the ranks of other states that approved a concealed campus firearm carry bill. The state also approved a bill that allows for open carry of firearms for licensed gun owners. Taken in combination, the potential for the development of a future open carry campus bill is possible. This study surveyed Texas University and College Police Officials to determine their perceptions of the perceived effects an open carry on college campus bill would have on campus crime, firearm incidents and fear of victimization among students, staff and faculty. Findings suggest that the perceived amount of crime on campus and number of firearm related incidents would remain unchanged. However, the fear of victimization of campus students and personnel would increase. Ultimately, the Texas higher education Police Officials are strongly opposed to the idea of any potential open carry bill for college campuses.

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<sup>1</sup> The University of North Texas at Dallas

<sup>2</sup> Texas Christian University

**Corresponding Author:** Aaron Bartula, [Aaron.bartula@untdallas.edu](mailto:Aaron.bartula@untdallas.edu)

## Introduction

Virginia Tech and other acts of gun violence on college campuses have renewed the debate concerning concealed handguns on campus. Federal laws aside, states have created a hodge-podge of policies concerning the legality of having guns on campus (Birnbaum, 2013). Some states ban guns on campus altogether, some prohibit institutions from banning guns on campus, while many states have given universities and colleges the choice to allow guns on campus (Bouffard, Nobles, & Wells, 2012). Approximately 23 states give the colleges and universities power in deciding gun control restrictions (Bennett, Kraft, & Grubb, 2012; Oswald, 2009) and 19 states prohibit campus carry (NCSL, 2015). To put these numbers in perspective, in 2012, 200 public campuses across six states allowed guns on campus (Birnbaum, 2013).

A number of those states that have yet to implement campus carry have proposed bills to their state's legislature for consideration; one such state is Texas. In 2015, the state of Texas Legislature was presented with two gun bills for consideration. Senate Bill 11 would allow individuals to carry weapons on Texas state college campuses (better known as campus carry). The bill narrowly passed and was signed into law in June 2015. Under the final version, universities and colleges still have latitude in determining where on campus they may be carried and how they should be stored based on public safety. The second bill that was also passed and signed by the Governor, House Bill 910 (known as open carry), allows licensed Texans to carry handguns in plain view in belt or shoulder holsters. Taken in combination, these bills could allow licensed students, faculty and staff to carry handguns on Texas University and College campuses.

With Texas joining the ranks of other campus carry states, it is imperative to understand the perceptions of those that will be tasked with implementing the bills, developing procedures, and ultimately are responsible for responding to any incidents that may potentially arise. This study questioned whether the perceived effects on campus crime and fear amongst students, faculty and staff would be elevated if firearms were able to be carried on campus in plain sight. Though the knowledge of campus carry may have an effect of campus crime, the adage "out of sight out of mind" may diminish that effect. If firearms are in view, it is assumed here that any potential effect becomes more tangible for the population of concern. The purpose of this study is to assess the perceptions of university police officials regarding the possibility of open carry on Texas campuses. To that end, the following questions are posited: "*Are you in favor of open carry on college campuses?*", and lastly, "*will open carry make students, faculty and staff feel safer from crime and victimization?*" It is postulated by this study that police officials will not be in favor of open carry on college campuses,

and that the open carry will increase the perception of crime and fear of victimization amongst the group.

The following literature review examines the literature concerning campus carry and the recent Texas legislation that will bring large scale changes to gun policies on public university campuses across the state. First though, a discussion concerning the current national debate on guns and gun ownership in the United States is warranted.

## **Literature Review**

### *The Gun vs. Anti-Gun Culture in America*

Nationally, there is a large scale debate concerning gun ownership. There are two competing cultures in the United States about guns: a gun culture and an anti-gun culture. According to Winkler (2011), there are about 300 million guns owned by civilians in the United States, equivalent to approximately one for every person. Though studies have found that household gun ownership is on the decline compared to previous decades (Hepburn, Miller, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2007; True & Utter, 2001), the number of guns per household is increasing (Saad, 2011; True & Utter, 2002). The discussion concerning guns and whether they keep people safe is still debated with mixed conclusions. For example, two national studies on the topic have produced opposite conclusions. Lott and Mustard (1997) found that allowing eligible citizens to carry concealed handguns deters violent crime, while Ayres and Donohue III (2003) concluded that statistical evidence supporting Lott and Mustard's conclusions are limited and suggested making it easier to obtain firearms may increase crime levels.

Recent studies show public opinion has shifted in the controversial topic of gun ownership. The Pew Research Center (2014) has found, for the first time in two decades, there is more support for gun rights than gun control. The question asked to respondents was "What do you think is more important – to protect the right of Americans to own guns or to control gun ownership?" The Center found that 52% of surveyed individuals said it was more important to protect the gun ownership rights of Americans while 46% of Americans said gun control was important. This is a 7% increase in gun ownership rights since January 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Demographically, Blacks views on the topic have changed dramatically, with 54% of Blacks currently saying gun ownership protects people's lives more than endangering them, up from just 29% in December 2012. However, 60% say it is more important to control gun ownership versus prioritizing gun rights. Whites' views on gun ownership have increased by 8%, with 62% of Whites currently viewing guns as protecting individuals, and 61% of Whites prioritize gun rights over gun control (Pew Research Center, 2014). Within a month of the Pew Research Center (2014) study being

published, the study itself and its methodology drew criticism from gun control advocates and gun violence experts. These individuals argued that the survey questions were too simplistic and misleading, suggesting that respondents had to choose between polar opposite positions (gun control or gun rights) instead of asking about any specific policy (Pew Research Center, 2015). But a Gallup poll in 2014 found similar results, that only 47% of Americans favor stricter gun control laws, down 11% from 2012 (Swift, 2014). The same study found that approximately 73% of Americans surveyed said that handguns should not be banned.

Political party affiliation has always influenced opinions about guns, and there is a larger gap in gun ownership opinions between the two parties than ever before. A majority of Democrats (60%) revealed that gun ownership puts people's safety at risk, while only 35% feel they protect people from becoming victims. On the contrary, 80% of Republicans say guns protect people more than do harm (Pew Research Center, 2014). The 2014 Gallup poll found that 71% of Democrats express support for stricter gun laws compared to only 29% of Republicans (Swift, 2014).

Naturally, the larger gun discussion fuels smaller but important debates, such as campus carry. Concerns about the safety of individuals on college campuses are a hot topic among university administrators and state legislators across the United States. The sections below discuss campus carry legislation and studies conducted on the topic.

### *Campus Carry*

Utah was the first state to allow concealed handguns on public college campuses in 2004 (Bennett, Kraft, & Grubb, 2012), through judicial (not legislative) decision. The Utah Supreme Court ruled that colleges and universities could not ban firearms on their property (Lipka, 2008). The guns on college campus debate was re-ignited after the Virginia Tech shooting by a student that killed 32 students and faculty (Bennett, Kraft, & Grubb, 2012; Birnbaum, 2013; Bouffard, Nobles, & Wells, 2012; Bouffard, Nobles, Wells, & Cavanaugh, 2012; Patten, Thomas, & Wada, 2013). Less than a year later, a shooting at Northern Illinois University that killed six people increased pressures on state legislators to take action (Bennett, Kraft, & Grubb, 2012). Since, several states initiated legislative efforts to overturn policies banning concealed carry on campus (Lipka, 2008). For example, in 2008, seventeen states looked at enacting legislation resembling Utah's law (Oswald, 2009), to permit students and faculty with concealed handgun's licenses to carry concealed guns on campus (Bennett, Kraft, & Grubb, 2012). In 2013, there were 19 states that introduced legislation to allow some form of campus carry (NCSL, 2015). Many of these legislative initiatives have failed or stalled at some point. Currently, there are six states that allow some form of campus

carry, including Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Oregon, Utah, and Wisconsin (NCSL, 2015).

Concerning campus crime, the Clery Act requires institutions in the United States to track and disclose annual reports of violence and crime that occurs on campus. The reports validate that crime and violence on college campuses is drastically less than in the general population, and Birnbaum (2013) concluded after analyzing 2010 Clery Act institution reports that the chance of being a victim of homicide on a college campus was approximately as slim as being struck by lightning. Additionally, deadly violence on college campuses is rare. The Secret Service, Office of Education, and the FBI examined 272 incidences of violence on college campuses from 1990-2008 and found that guns were used in 54% of the incidences. Results indicate that the majority of incidences had victims known to the assailant and that random fatal attacks by strangers on college campuses were extremely small (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010; see also, Bromley, 1995; Hummer, 2004; Patten, Thomas, & Wada, 2013; Sloan, 1992; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011).

### *Perceptions of Campus Carry*

The debate concerning campus carry is a current hot topic due to all of the legislative interest over the years. However, there has been a relatively small amount of research concerning perceptions of campus carry on college campuses. In a study utilizing adult U.S. residents in 1999, Hemenway, Azrael, & Miller (2001) found that 94% of the respondents thought that regular citizens should not be allowed to carry guns on college campuses.

In a more general study on gun control, Payne and Reidel (2002) examined whether students, based on their college major, had different attitudes towards gun control. Respondents were asked 10 questions with a maximum score of 60 concerning gun control. The sample, across majors reported an average mean of 42 points. The researchers found that students majoring in criminal justice reported significantly lower support for gun control. Demographically, respondents who were male, white, from a rural hometown, individuals currently owning a gun, and individuals with more gun experience were less likely than other respondents to support gun control.

Brinker (2008) conducted the first study on student opinions concerning campus carry at Missouri State University. Utilizing a small sample of randomly selected students (n=318), the majority of students did not want faculty (66%), staff (72%), or students (76%) to be able to carry concealed guns on campus. Though the study was small, Brinker (2008) laid the foundation surveying students' perceptions of campus carry. Similarly, surveying different majors at a Texas university and a Washington

state university in the fall of 2009, Bouffard, Nobles, and Wells (2012) studied whether college major is related to students' desire to carry a concealed handgun on campus. With 3,264 respondents from the Texas university and 2,014 from the Washington university, the researchers found that criminal justice majors were more likely to respond to the survey compared to non-criminal justice majors. More respondents reported they were not interested in obtaining a CHL and carrying a legally concealed handgun than respondents who reported an absolute likelihood of doing both. This finding was more pronounced in the Washington sample than the Texas one. Utilizing multinomial probit regression, the researchers found that CJ majors were more likely (than other majors) to express interest in obtaining a CHL and carrying a concealed handgun on campus (Bouffard, Nobles, & Wells, 2012).

While Georgia legislators were looking into campus carry legislation, Bennett, Kraft, and Grubb (2012) surveyed (via email) 145 faculty at a Georgia University in fall of 2008 concerning campus carry. Approximately 72% of respondents "strongly opposed" allowing licensed gun owners the right to carry guns on campus, while an additional 6% "opposed" the statement. Multivariate analysis found that gun ownership and political party was a significant determinant of faculty attitudes about campus carry; individuals who owned guns and individuals who identified as Republic were more likely to support campus carry.

Lastly, Patten, Thomas, and Wada (2013) surveyed faculty, staff, and students at Chico State and Chadron College during the fall 2008 and spring 2009 semesters. Receiving 1,484 surveys from Chico State and 580 surveys from Chadron College, the researchers found that the overwhelming majority of respondents (73%) did not want qualified individuals carrying guns on campus, and 70% felt they did not feel safer with concealed handguns on campus. The researchers found that female respondents were much less likely to support carrying concealed guns on campus, while respondents who identified as being conservative were more likely to support concealed carry compared to liberal students. However, the majority of conservatives did not support the carrying of concealed handguns by private citizens. The study found similar findings with gun owners (Patten, Thomas, & Wada, 2013).

These studies findings suggest that the majority of surveyed university personnel and students do not want citizens to be able to legally carry concealed handguns on college universities. Despite these empirical conclusions, campus carry is still a hot topic that continues to be on the legislative agenda for multiple states. Recently, Texas has been at the forefront with political leaders pushing the legislative agenda to legalize concealed gun carry on Texas public university and college campuses.

## *Texas Legislation*

Texas legislators have long considered and debated legislation concerning concealed handguns on college campuses (see Elliot, 2009; Lipka, 2008). These legislative pushes have previously failed until recently. In May 2015, the Texas Senate approved a bill that would allow handguns on Texas public universities in dorms, classrooms, and campus buildings. The Senate approved the bill by a 98-47 vote, a larger margin than the bill passed in the house (Smith, 2015). Governor Greg Abbott signed Senate Bill 11, more commonly known as campus carry, into law in June 2015 at a shooting range in Pflugerville, Texas. The law takes effect August 1, 2016 (CBS Local, 2015). The campus carry law was signed the same day as the open carry bill that allows people to open carry handguns (with a CHL) virtually anywhere in Texas. To obtain a CHL in the state, individuals must be 21 years of age (KXAN, 2015).

One of the most publicized opponents to the bill was University of Texas System Chancellor and former Navy admiral, William McRaven, who oversees nine universities throughout Texas (Watkins, 2015). Though he and many other school officials opposed the bill and voiced concerns, the bill's House sponsor, state representative Allen Fletcher, claimed that the media, parents, students, and school officials exaggerate the consequences of the bill (Smith, 2015).

## *Purpose of Study*

As the literature review suggests, there have been a small but growing number of studies examining the perceptions of university personnel and students concerning campus carry on college campuses. However, there has not been a study to date that has assessed university police perceptions of campus carry. The purpose of this study is to assess the perceptions of university police officials regarding campus carry in Texas. The timing of this study seems ideal given the recent change in Texas legislation allowing licensed (CHL) individuals to carry handguns on public college campuses in the state.

## **Methods**

### *Data*

The data were collected through an electronic survey of University and College police officials in the state of Texas. Top police officials were chosen for this study because they would be directly responsible for enforcing the new Texas policies and responding to any potential incidents on campus. Working with the Texas Association

of College and University Police Administrators (TACUPA), a list of University and College Police Chiefs' (or the equivalent, such as public safety or security directors) email addresses in the state were collected. This yielded a total of one hundred and forty seven email addresses. After bad email addresses were removed, a total of one hundred and fifteen surveys were sent out.

The thirty one question survey was distributed at four different time points. The initial wave was dispersed in early April 2015. A follow-up reminder for non-participants was emailed approximately one month later. A subsequent third announcement was then sent three weeks after and a final notice was sent one week later; resulting in a total time of 3 months. Of the 115 total surveys, forty seven responded giving a response rate of 41% (N = 47). All forty seven respondents voluntarily completed the ten-minute survey in the allotted time frame.

### *Dependent Variable*

The main focus of this study was based on approval/disapproval of open carry on campus. Respondents were asked: "Are you in favor of open carry on college campuses?" The response choices were Yes, No, and Don't Know. In order to fulfil the purpose of this study, it was important to include a response for those that may be uncertain about the bills. This allowed for the parsing out of any effect that may be seen based on respondents with an extreme political leaning towards gun policies.

In addition, the other dependent variables of interest focused on perceived effects on total campus crimes and firearm related crimes, as well as, fear of victimization among students, faculty and staff. The questions used to measure number of crimes and firearms incidents included: "How do you think that open carry on college/university campuses will affect university crime rates?", and "How do you think that open carry on college/university campuses will affect the number of university firearm related incidents?" Both questions offered responses of Decrease, Increase, Will not change, and Don't know.

In order to measure fear of victimization amongst the target population, the study used 5 point Likert scale responses: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Using decrease as the point of reference, the two questions asked, "If there is open carry on college/university campuses, students' fear of victimization on campus will decrease" and "If there is open carry on college/university campuses, faculty and staff fear of victimization on campus will decrease."



**Table 1** Individual Demographic Breakdown

<b>Variable</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>f%</b>
Gender (N=47)		
Male	44	93.62
Non-Male	3	6.38
Race (N=47)		
White	38	80.85
Non-White	9	19.15
Age (N=47)		
31-35	1	2.13
36-40	4	8.51
41-50	7	14.89
46-50	5	10.64
51-55	8	17.02
56+	22	46.81
Years as Officer (N=47)		
0-1	3	6.38
2-4	0	0
5-7	1	2.13
8-12	1	2.13
13+	42	89.36
Years as Top Official (N=46)		
0-1	1	2.17
2-4	7	15.22
5-7	8	17.39
8-12	8	17.39
13+	22	47.83
Years at Current Institution (N=45)		
0-1	3	6.67
2-4	13	28.88
5-7	5	11.11
8-12	8	17.78
13+	16	35.56

*Other Variables of Focus*

Other variables of note for this study focused on the background of the respondent and the current climate of crime and firearm incidents on each campus. Informed by previous literature, a number of individual-level factors were

measured. Both race and gender were included. Due to the demographic breakdown of the sample, both variables were dichotomously coded as White (0) and Non-White (1), and Male (0) and Non-Male (1) after the descriptive statistics were assessed. The vast majority of the sample were White Males (81%). Though all respondents were current University/College top police officials, there were still a variety of ages in the sample. Age was measured at the ordinal level with a mode of fifty six years or older.

Similarly, years employed as a licensed peace officer, years of experience as a University/College Police Officer, and years of experience as a top University/College police official, were all included in the analyses. Further, as additional measures of experience and campus enforcement knowledge, the study also controlled for the number of years as the head of police at their current institution, as well as, the total number of institutions of higher learning that they have served in that capacity. The average respondent had served as a top ranking University/College police official for more than thirteen years and in that position at more than one institution of higher learning. In addition to individual level factors, it was also prudent to measure variables at the university level to estimate the climate of crime and firearm usage on each campus.

The size of the university was controlled for via total student body enrollment in the final analysis. It was assumed that larger universities/colleges would have a greater number of firearm incidents and therefore have a more passionate view on possible ramifications of open carry on campus. Additionally, the area of the institution was measured as rural, suburban and urban. Similar to institution size, locale may influence police officials' views on campus effect. Finally, institution public or private status was also gauged. Historically, private institutions have more latitude with state policy enforcement than public institutions that are state funded. However, on its surface the bill applies equally to both state funded and private institutions, "Campus means all land and buildings owned or leased by an institution of higher education or private or independent institution of higher education" (CBS.local, 2015). None-the-less it is important to control for the institution status.

**Table 2** Institutional Demographic Breakdown

<b>Variable</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>f%</b>
Public or Private		
Public	37	78.72
Private	10	21.28
Area		
Rural	10	21.28
Suburban	14	29.79
Urban	23	48.94
Enrollment		
0-2500	9	19.15
2501-5000	13	27.66
5001-7500	6	12.77
7501-10000	7	14.89
7501-10000	7	14.89
10001-15000	3	6.38
15001-20000	1	2.13
20001+	8	17.02
Crimes/year		
0	0	0
1-10	7	14.89
11-20	4	8.51
21-35	7	14.89
36-60	5	10.64
61-80	4	8.51
81-100	4	8.51
101+	16	34.04
Firearms/year		
0	23	48.94
1-3	20	42.55
4-6	3	6.38
7-9	0	0
10-12	0	0
13+	1	2.13
N = 47		

## Results

The findings confirm the assertions made here. The overwhelming majority (91.5%) of the sample are not in favor of open carry on campuses. With the exception of three outliers, all respondents did not approve of open carry on campus; of the three, only

one was in favor of open carry whereas the other two were uncertain. Further, they believe that such a law would increase fear of crime and victimization among students, faculty and staff. As stated, the questions used to measure fear of crime and victimization used decrease as the point of reference. In regards to fear of crime on campus among students and faculty and staff, eighty-five percent and eighty-three percent respectively of the sample disagreed that open carry would decrease the fear of crime. Similarly, roughly eighty percent believed it would not decrease fear of victimization. While these findings were expected, the lack of variance in the sample was not. Specifically, no less than 80 percent of the sample agreed on any given variable. Table 3 represents simple regression results for each dependent variable and all control variables.

In addition to the twenty eight close-ended survey questions, the final three questions allowed the respondent to provide valuable qualitative feedback. Questions 29 and 30 measured the perceived advantages and risks of an open carry law. In concurrence with the above results, the comments illustrated a strong opposition to the idea of open carry on University/College campuses. Few respondents provided feedback for the perceived advantages question, however all but five respondents provided remarks on the possible disadvantages. Some examples of the potential advantages “Ability to intervene in a shooting situation, which rarely occurs”; “Does offer a visible deterrent”; “Those carrying believe they can protect themselves and others but their training is limited”; “I do not see a benefit”, “There are no advantages to open carry on college/university campuses”, “None comes to mind.”

Unlike the limited number of comments provided for question 29, the opinions expressed in response to the potential risks echoed the belief of the sample that they are not in favor of open carry. The below comments are representative of the theme of the sample: “Higher Education is an enlightened, open environment intended to stimulate creative, open thinking where intense challenging debate of topics is considered standard. A college education is costly and continues to rise placing intense pressure on students to succeed. In my opinion, introducing firearms into this environment whether concealed or open carry is not a healthy idea”; “the weapon falling in the wrong hands, a person overtaken and the weapon forcibly removed”; “Increased risk of accidental discharge. Mishandling of weapon (i.e., showing off weapon to others), Weapon as a harassment or intimidation tool. Misplace or lose weapon during school activities or while using the restroom”; “More gun related incidents from stressed out students/staff”; “1) The liability of an officer responding to a situation in which he or she has to decide who is the CHL holder or suspect. 2) The ability of the officer to identify who has a CHL or not. Based on PC or reasonable suspicion and the legal ramifications as a result of questioning the CHL holder. 3) the

new law will create more fear on campus than before. 4) Enough funding to train each officers in verbal de-escalation tactics.” These observations confirm the uneasiness that top University/College police officials have towards any potential open carry bills.

Finally, question 31 provided an opportunity for respondents to voice any other questions or concerns that were not addressed in the survey. Comments such as: “I have serious concerns about the open carry law with the amendment restricting law enforcement's ability to verify the handgun carry license status of the person carrying the firearm”, and “I am concerned with weapons in dorms and their mixing with drugs and alcohol”, or “I don't have a problem with concealed carry, but I think open carry is a distraction on campus we don't need”, finally, “Instead of open carry/campus carry, the state should invest in more police officers.” Based on these collective sentiments, it appears the respondents strongly oppose open carry and believe this legislation has greater potential to negatively impact a campus than positively.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of top university police officials regarding campus carry in Texas. Despite media attention on the larger gun control debate, little empirical research exists concerning perceptions of open carry laws on college campuses. While the current study represents an exploratory analysis of a small sample of police officials in Texas universities, it appears clear that many of the people in charge of implementing open carry legislation have strong opinions against it.

What little scientific research that has been conducted on campus carry has found that the majority of individuals sampled have strong concerns about the topic and are opposed to it; something that legislators seem to have overlooked or ignored. One comment in particular appears to embody the feelings of the entire sample: “Doesn't matter what we think, the legislators think they know best and are going to do what they do. We'll do what we always do and deal with the aftermath.”

Though exploratory, this study is informative for several reasons. First, the literature on campus carry is limited, and studies concerning university police officials' perceptions are even more scant. This study starts to bridge this gap. Second, it is important to study the perceptions of the people most directly affected by this legislation. Police officials will be enforcing this new legislation and are the first responders to any weapons related incidences. Therefore, it is critical their voices be heard. Third, the findings suggest that there is strong opposition to campus carry, legislation in Texas that will inevitably become law in 2016. This represents an

interesting dynamic between the politicians and the people that the legislation directly affects.

## Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to this study that should be discussed. First, the sample size was small. University police officials who did not have an email address listed were excluded from the sampling frame. Of the remaining police officials from different universities (n=115) that were sampled, our response rate was 41%. Therefore, we cannot generalize these findings to all police officials in Texas. Second, only the police chief or the highest ranking official at each university's police or public safety department was given the opportunity to complete the survey. Consequently, the results are limited to the perceptions of each individual respondent, not the department at large.

Future research should continue to survey university officials and students concerning campus carry. Specifically, perceptions of whether campus carry has had an effect on campus crime rates and fear of crime post implementation. Additionally, questions should be asked concerning the likelihood of these individuals obtaining a CHL to be able to carry on campus, as well as, comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in implementation of the campus carry bill by university (e.g., restricted/allowed locations, safety/police department changes, etc.). Researchers should not solely rely on survey research, but additionally utilize time series analysis to examine crime rates before and after law implementation not only in Texas but in the other states that allow some form of campus carry. This future research also should be expanded to compare differences in private versus public universities, since private universities have the right to opt out of implementing the law.

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## **About the Authors**

**Dr. Aaron Bartula** earned his doctorate from the University of Texas at Dallas, and is an Assistant professor and the Program Coordinator of the criminal justice department at the University of North Texas Dallas. His research interests include juvenile delinquency treatment interventions and policy, as well as, criminal justice in higher education. E-mail: [Aaron.bartula@untdallas.edu](mailto:Aaron.bartula@untdallas.edu)

**Dr. Kendra Bowen** earned her doctorate from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and is a criminal justice Assistant professor at Texas Christian University. Her other current research interests include clergy sexual abuse and offender reentry.