



March 5, 2008

Arizona Weighs Bill to Allow Guns on Campuses

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#)

PHOENIX — Horrified by recent campus shootings, a state lawmaker here has come up with a proposal in keeping with the Taurus .22-caliber pistol tucked in her purse: Get more guns on campus.

The lawmaker, State Senator Karen S. Johnson, has sponsored a bill, which the Senate Judiciary Committee approved last week, that would allow people with a concealed weapons permit — limited to those 21 and older here — to carry their firearms at public colleges and universities. Concealed weapons are generally not permitted at most public establishments, including colleges.

Ms. Johnson, a Republican from Mesa, said she believed that the recent carnage at [Northern Illinois University](#) could have been prevented or limited if an armed student or professor had intercepted the gunman. The police, she said, respond too slowly to such incidents and, besides, who better than the people staring down the barrel to take action?

She initially wanted her bill to cover all public schools, kindergarten and up, but other lawmakers convinced her it stood a better chance of passing if it were limited to higher education.

“I feel like our kindergartners are sitting there like sitting ducks,” Ms. Johnson said last week when the bill passed the committee by a 4-to-3 vote.

This is a generally gun-friendly state, where people are allowed to carry a weapon on their hip without a permit as long as people can see it. Even so, Ms. Johnson acknowledges that her views come from the far right — she recently described herself, half-jokingly, she says, as a “right-wing wacko.”

Still, the proposal has troubled advocates of gun control here and elsewhere because it appears to be gaining popularity and has fed long-smoldering debates over restrictions on carrying firearms.

Since the [Virginia Tech](#) killings last April, other states have weighed similar legislation, to the disbelief of opponents, who note that the odds of lethal attacks are small, despite the publicity they attract.

The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, a Washington nonprofit organization, said 15 states were considering legislation that would authorize or make it easier for people to carry guns on school or college campuses under certain conditions. Those states include Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan and Virginia, according to the center, but it considers the Arizona proposal particularly egregious because it would not only allow students and faculty to carry such weapons, but staff members as well.

Utah, the organization said, is the only state with a law that expressly allows people with a concealed-weapon permit to carry guns on college campuses. That law, adopted in 2004 and upheld by Utah's [Supreme Court](#) in 2006, arose out of concern that a state law allowing concealed weapons was not being enforced on college campuses.

The critics of such laws predict that they would cause more problems, including making it hard for the police to sort a dangerous gunman from a crowd of others with guns. They also argue that the guns would make it easier for people barely out of adolescence, or perhaps emotionally troubled, to respond lethally to typical campus frustrations like poor grades or failed romances.

Fred Boice, president of the Arizona Board of Regents, which oversees the state's three public universities, said he sympathized with people concerned about campus safety. In October 2002, a nursing student at the [University of Arizona](#) in Tucson who was failing his classes shot and killed three professors before killing himself.

But Mr. Boice said he believed security and a system of alerting people about crises had been improved since then, and he worried that disputes best handled by campus security could quickly turn deadly with more guns on campus.

"I grew up in the country and a lot of people had guns," Mr. Boice said. "But my father said never carry a gun unless you are prepared to kill somebody, and I believe that."

Proponents concede the proposal could face a fight, even in this state's Republican-controlled Legislature. The police chiefs at Arizona's universities and several law enforcement groups have condemned the bill.

"This is a very polarizing issue," said John Wentling, vice president of the Arizona Citizens Defense League, a gun-rights group that has pushed for the bill.

Even if Ms. Johnson's bill eventually passes both chambers, it will probably take some convincing for Gov. [Janet Napolitano](#), a Democrat, to sign it. Ms. Napolitano rejected a bill a few years ago that would have lifted a prohibition on carrying loaded firearms into bars, restaurants and other places that serve alcohol.

Ms. Johnson's proposal has gotten a mixed reception on the campuses.

Jason Lewis, 23, an aerospace engineering major at the University of Arizona, said he was mugged twice on campus last year, at knife point and at gunpoint. He now has a concealed-weapons permit and carries his gun everywhere he can.

"It would at least let me protect myself," said Mr. Lewis, one of a few students to testify in support of the bill at a recent hearing. "If word gets out students are arming themselves, criminals will be, like, 'Maybe we should back off.' It will be a deterrent."

But Cole Hickman, a student at [Arizona State University](#) in Tempe, said he had sought to rally opposition to the bill, concerned that, among other things, it would further jeopardize people during a mass shooting. Proponents of the bill, Mr. Hickman said, underestimate the difficulty in shooting a live target in a chaotic episode.

"If another student in the room or a teacher had a gun and opened fire they may hurt other students," he said, "because unlike police officers, concealed-weapon permit holders are not necessarily well-trained in shooting in crowds and reacting to those kinds of situations."

Ms. Johnson is not fazed by the skeptics.

"We are not the wild, wild West like people think we are," she said. "But people are more independent thinkers here when it comes to security."

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