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Perceptions of Campus Safety and Campus Carry Among Student Veterans

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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MSPH, Southern New Hampshire University, 2019

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Student veterans are an essential population for research but remain consistently underexamined in the literature. Similarly, veterans carrying firearms are an essential but under-examined topic in the literature. This study sought to address gaps in both domains by investigating student veterans' perspectives on safety and firearms on campus, or "campus carry". Campus carry refers to a set of policies that vary by jurisdiction but generally allow individuals to legally carry concealed firearms on all or some parts of a public university or college campus. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how student veterans in Texas perceive campus safety and how these perceptions influence their decisions to carry firearms on their respective campuses. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 student veterans enrolled in Texas universities and colleges. The data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically. A novel phenomenon around student veteran identity formation was identified, with firearm-carrying student veterans exhibiting more fixed or static identities. In contrast, non-firearm-carrying student veterans exhibited more transitional or evolutionary identities. These divergent identities suggest student veterans should not be treated as a monolithic group and their decisions around firearms are influenced by their individual histories and broader sociocultural factors. The study contributes to positive social change by highlighting student veterans' unique perspectives and offering campus administrators and policymakers insights into fostering safer, more inclusive academic environments. By addressing the roots of both perceived and actual risks, stakeholders can better support the academic success of student veterans.

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Dedication

For everyone who made it home but still haven’t found peace.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The policy issue of carrying firearms on campus, known as campus carry, is complex, multifaceted, and deeply intertwined with public health, mental health, violence prevention, and educational policies. Firearms are associated with significant adverse public health outcomes (Werbick et al., 2021). They are strongly associated with an increased risk of violence in communities (Jehan et al., 2018). Campus carry impacts everyone on campus, including the student veteran subpopulation.

Student veterans face unique health stressors such as military sexual trauma, prolonged family separation, and mental health disorders, which amplify the risks associated with firearms. Factors such as increased suicidality risk and socioeconomic challenges further complicate this issue, highlighting the need for nuanced exploration and understanding (Bradwisch, 2022; Dempsey et al., 2019). This study aimed to understand the experiences of student veterans that lead them to carry firearms on campus, recognizing that student veterans are not a monolithic group but a community with diverse backgrounds, including varying levels of combat exposure and roles within the military (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Through in-depth interviews, this study aimed to uncover how perceptions influence student veterans' choice to carry firearms, how they navigate the academic environment, and how campus policies impact their experiences.

This study also explored the impact of campus carry policies on the student veteran's sense of safety, belonging, and academic engagement. It aimed to understand student veterans' perspectives on whether these policies were supportive or detrimental to their academic journeys. By focusing on student veterans' lived experiences, this study

provides valuable, direct insights into more comprehensive, often contentious discussions about campus safety and gun control, enriching the debate with grounded, firsthand perspectives. Finally, this study was conducted to explore student veterans' perceptions of campus safety and its impact on campus carry. By delving into the motivations and experiences that lead these individuals to carry firearms, this study aimed to add context to the choices and unique situations these student veterans found themselves in.

This study can encourage future research, addressing the complex issues surrounding firearms and campus safety. Moreover, by shedding light on the perceptions and experiences of student veterans who conceal carry, this study aimed to reduce disparities in understanding between this group and the broader campus community. Given the polarized nature of the topic, it is crucial to approach it as a qualitative study, offering a platform for this often-overlooked population to share their experiences, thereby recognizing them as a distinct population with unique needs and perspectives.

Background

Campus carry became a policy issue when Colorado explicitly allowed firearms on college and university campuses 2003 (Melear & St Louis, 2015). Following the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, firearm rights groups took up "campus carry" as a policy issue. Counterintuitively, the stated policy goal of campus carry is to prevent campus shooting events. However, evidence strongly suggests that it does not increase safety and likely leads to more harm (Webster et al., 2016).

Currently, 17 states explicitly ban firearms on college campuses, 22 allow colleges and universities to set their policies, and 11 require colleges and universities to

allow concealed firearms on campus (each state varies in the specifics of its policy implementation; Rock, 2023).

Higher education is crucial to the transition from military to civilian employment. The educational benefits offered by the military are vital in attracting young people to enlist. As a result, there is a significant presence of veterans and military-affiliated students in U.S. higher education institutions. In the 2021 fiscal year, 610,009 veterans utilized the GI Bill for higher education programs (Kofoed, 2020). This figure highlights the substantial number of veterans pursuing higher education as a step towards civilian careers.

Many student veterans undergo military training and are exposed to various forms of combat, making their relationship with firearms distinct from that of the general student population (Yancey et al., 2023). Veterans own firearms at nearly double the rate of their civilian counterparts (Alva et al., 2018; Schell et al., 2020). 23% of veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health challenges (Goldstein et al., 2016; Heinz et al., 2016; Yancey et al., 2023). These factors make student veterans a significant subpopulation to study in order to prevent firearm-related violence.

The presence of firearms on college campuses has sparked intense public debate, underscoring the need for informed policy development and support systems (Webster et al., 2016). This debate is centered on the relationship between firearm carrying and campus safety, including aspects of violent crime and mass shootings. The complexity of this issue necessitates a thorough understanding of all its aspects to create effective campus policies and support structures responsive to the unique needs and perspectives of

all campus community members, including student veterans.

Problem Statement

What prompted me to search the literature was concern about firearms on college campuses, especially among student veterans. There is significant variation in campus carry policies across the United States, but most college and university communities oppose firearms on campus (Hassett et al., 2020). Even with this opposition, 11 states allowed the concealed carrying of firearms on college and university campuses, 19 explicitly banned the carrying of firearms on college and university campuses, and 19 states allowed the institution to set their policy (H. E. Jones & Horan, 2019). Texas (where the study took place) is one of the 12 states that allow campus carry for permitted concealed carry license holders. There are still some restrictions on where firearms can be carried on campus, including restrictions on firearms in sensitive areas such as mental health offices and childcare centers (Somers et al., 2020).

Several factors (such as being White, male, and having a conservative political alignment) are strongly associated with support for campus-carry policies (Hassett & Kim, 2021). Additionally, believing that there is an increased likelihood of crime victimization increases support for campus carries. Veterans are more likely to carry firearms than the general population (Heinz et al., 2016). This, combined with veterans' increased rates of suicide attempts (SA) and suicidal ideation (SI; Bossarte et al., 2021; Theis et al., 2021) and the linkage between access to lethal means (Yip et al., 2012) and suicide mortality, creates an intersection of a troubling phenomenon. Additionally, given the general campus community's view of firearms (predominantly negative perceptions

of firearms; H. E. Jones & Horan, 2019), firearms may create additional hurdles for veterans integrating into campus life (Hassett & Kim, 2021).

Researchers like Webster et al. (2016) and Tanner and Kelemen (2023) have extensively investigated this issue; however, the topic of firearms on college campuses has not been explored from the perspective of student veterans. These perspectives have been explored in other contexts such as the broader issues surrounding firearm access (Hasset et al., 2020, 2021, 2023). However, they have not delved into the nuanced experiences, decision-making processes, and social dynamics that shape the choices of student veterans regarding carrying firearms on campus. Furthermore, research has been conducted on the perceptions and attitudes of various stakeholders, such as college administrators, faculty, and fellow students, towards campus carry policies and students who carry firearms (Hayes et al., 2021; H. E. Jones & Horan, 2019); little is known about the individual perspectives of students who carry firearms, and none have explored the perspectives of student veterans.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted to explore student veterans' experiences and decision-making processes around carrying a firearm on campus. This study focused on the relationship between perceptions of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers) and the impact of carrying firearms on college campuses.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of student veterans of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers)?

Research Question 2: How do student veterans' perceptions of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers) influence their firearm carrying on college/university campuses?

Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Study

This study's theoretical framework is grounded in phenomenology. This approach was suited to examining the lived experiences and personal perceptions of student veterans who choose to carry firearms on campus. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of these experiences from participants' perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach allowed me to delve into the reasons behind their decision to carry firearms, including local legal frameworks, cultural contexts, personal experiences, perceived safety threats, and mental health factors. The interview questions were developed to explore these dimensions in depth and focused on the following:

- Perception of campus safety.
- Personal motivation for carrying firearms.
- Any perceived advantages or disadvantages associated with firearm possession.
- Specific factors or situations that prompt the decision to carry firearms.
- Campus environmental factors shape their views and decisions.

In exploring these elements, phenomenology provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the subjective experiences of student veterans, enabling the study to capture the complexity of their decision-making processes related to campus carry. This approach aligns with the qualitative nature of the study, offering a comprehensive

framework for exploring and understanding the intricate motivations and perceptions of student veterans.

Nature of the Study

The design of this study adopted a phenomenological approach, which was suited for investigating qualitative research questions. Phenomenology is a theoretical framework that explores and describes people's lived experiences, the meanings they ascribe to them, and a methodological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach effectively unraveled the complex layers of student veterans' perceptions of campus safety. I was able to explore subjective experiences and offers a holistic view of the various factors influencing perceptions and decisions. This study provides an in-depth understanding of these experiences from veterans' perspectives and contributes to theoretical knowledge in this area. By capturing the essence of their experiences, this phenomenological study offers valuable insights that can inform future research, policy-making, and practice concerning campus safety and the well-being of student veterans.

Definitions

Campus carry: Generally, it refers to the concealed carrying of pistol-style firearms on an educational campus. It is a legal framework that permits the possession of firearms within the premises of an educational institution such as a college or university. Campus carry laws can vary by jurisdiction, including restrictions on who may carry firearms, where firearms may be carried, and what types are permitted (Webster et al., 2016).

Campus safety: The array of measures, policies, and practices implemented by

educational institutions to ensure the well-being and security of students, faculty, staff, and visitors within the campus environment. This encompasses physical safety (protection against crime, violence, and environmental hazards) and psychological safety, including fostering an inclusive and respectful atmosphere (Kyle et al., 2017).

Concealed carry: The practice of carrying a firearm in a concealed manner, either on one's person or nearby (i.e., purse or backpack), in public spaces. Unlike open carry, where the firearm is visible, concealed carry obscures the weapon. Laws governing concealed carry vary by jurisdiction and often require an individual to obtain a permit, which may involve background checks, training courses, and other prerequisites (Webster et al., 2016).

Firearm violence: An all-encompassing term that should be read as all physical and psychological harm caused to humans directly or indirectly by firearms. Suicide and homicide have been associated with firearm violence. However, firearms are also a significant source of injuries and disabilities. Psychological harm is caused by direct exposure to firearm violence (FPV). There are also effects of news media coverage of violence and the psychological harms associated with firearm-related violence in entertainment media.

Firearm: Portable weapon that expels one or more projectiles through an explosion or combustion. Firearms are categorized based on various factors, including the function, size, and type of ammunition used.

Personal safety: Individual practices and precautions taken to protect oneself from harm or danger in various contexts. This can include physical safety measures, such as

self-defense techniques or carrying protective devices, and psychological and emotional safety, which may involve awareness and avoidance of potentially harmful situations. Personal safety is often considered within the broader context of public safety and may be influenced by various external factors, including laws, social norms, and community resources (Kidd & Anderson, 2015).

Student veterans: Individuals who have served in the armed forces and are currently enrolled in an educational institution to obtain a degree or vocational training. This demographic is unique in that it often brings a distinct set of experiences, skills, and challenges to the academic environment, including but not limited to leadership skills, discipline, and potential physical or psychological trauma. Educational institutions often provide specialized services and resources to support student veterans' academic and social integration (Blaauw-Hara, 2016).

Assumptions

I assumed that phenomenology was the most relevant framework for understanding student veterans' perceptions of safety regarding campus carry. It was also assumed that qualitative interviews can yield rich, nuanced data that fully captures the experiences of student veterans and that participants answered the interview questions honestly and factually. It was assumed that there is a relationship between carrying firearms and the perceived sense of safety among student veterans. Further, I assumed that participants provided truthful responses during the interviews, allowing for an authentic representation of their lived experiences. It was also assumed that firearms on campus have a tangible impact on the campus community's overall sense of security and

well-being. This study also posits that the campus community, including student veterans, plays a crucial role in shaping and maintaining a safe and harmonious environment. These assumptions are foundational to the research design and critical for interpreting the findings within the context of student veterans' experiences with firearms on campus.

Scope and Delimitations

This study was designed to explore the perceptions of student veterans regarding safety. The focus was geographically limited to college and university campuses in Texas. Through volunteer and snowball sampling, this study gathered data from a specific subset of the student population—those who are veterans and choose to carry firearms. By analyzing the experiences and attitudes of these student veterans, this study intends to provide insights into how carrying firearms influences their sense of safety and belonging on campus. These findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon within a defined geographical and demographic scope.

Limitations

The limitations of this study stemmed from its design and methodology. Concerns include selection bias, where participants who were willing to discuss firearms or their military history may not represent the broader veteran population. Misunderstanding of questions by participants and interviewer bias also present challenges. These limitations are inherent to qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Patton, 2024). Efforts to minimize these biases and accurately capture participants' experiences were integral to this study's methodology. Addressing interviewer bias was a particular focus, with strategies informed by the guidelines suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2011).

Significance

While existing studies have explored broader issues surrounding veteran firearm ownership/access and the general experiences of student veterans, there is a lack of research on the nuanced experiences, decision-making processes, and social dynamics that shaped the choices of student veterans regarding carrying firearms on college campuses. Veterans are more likely to own a firearm and use it in a suicide attempt, leading to a higher suicide rate than their civilian counterparts (Dittus et al., 2023). This underscores the urgency to reduce gun ownership and promote safe gun storage among veterans to prevent gun-related violence.

The insights gained from this study can inform the development and revision of evidence-based policies and interventions to promote a safe and supportive environment for all students on college campuses, particularly student veterans. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of student veterans can guide the creation of comprehensive campus safety measures and support systems that address this population's specific needs and concerns. By exploring the intersection of mental health, veteran status, and firearm carrying, my research can shed light on student veterans' mental health support needs and inform the development of targeted interventions. It can help shape the provision of mental health services sensitive to student veterans' experiences, facilitating early identification, intervention, and treatment of mental health concerns.

The study findings can contribute to public health advocacy efforts related to firearm injury prevention and campus safety. By generating knowledge about the experiences and decision-making processes of student veterans regarding firearm

carrying, this research can inform public health campaigns, educational initiatives, and community engagement efforts aimed at reducing firearm-related incidents, promoting responsible firearm ownership, and advocating for comprehensive safety measures. The study findings can contribute to public health advocacy efforts related to firearm injury prevention and campus safety by generating knowledge about student veterans' experiences and decision-making processes regarding firearm carrying. This research can inform public health campaigns, educational initiatives, and community engagement efforts to reduce firearm-related incidents, promote responsible firearm ownership, and advocate for comprehensive safety measures.

Summary

This study was conducted to explore the multifaceted issue of student veterans carrying firearms on college campuses. It intersects public health, mental health, violence prevention, and education policy. It is crucial to consider veterans' unique experiences and needs, the potential for violence (against themselves or others), and the implications for public health and safety. A qualitative research design, specifically phenomenology, was used to explore the lived experiences of student veterans. It filled a significant gap in the literature by focusing on that population's unique experiences and needs. The findings informed the development of evidence-based policies and interventions to promote a safe and supportive environment for all students, particularly student veterans. It also contributed to public health advocacy for firearm injury prevention and campus safety.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The discourse around firearms, concealed carry, specifically campus carry, has grown increasingly complex due to numerous societal changes and challenges (Smith-Walter et al., 2016). One underrepresented population in this debate is student veterans attempting to navigate the intricacies of civilian life and academia while grappling with personal experiences from their military tenure. The relationship between student veterans and firearms has profound implications for public health (Theis et al., 2021).

Twenty-six states have implemented some form of campus carry, and colleges and universities have had to grapple with firearms on their campuses in a vacuum of concrete evidence to guide the implementation of these policies to ensure the safety and well-being of students, faculty, and staff (Rock, 2023). Academic institutions are important spaces for the reintegration of veterans (Borsari et al., 2017). Understanding and serving their unique needs, experiences, and challenges becomes paramount to fostering an inclusive and safe environment.

Transitioning from military to civilian life is complex (Verkamp, 2021). This is an even more intricate process for veterans entering academic settings (Borsari et al., 2017). Student veterans often grapple with various physical and mental health challenges, including combat-related disability, PTSD, anxiety, and depression, which the pressures of academic life may compound. Student veterans may experience feelings of isolation and hindered access to campus services. Educational institutions must provide specialized services and implement policies to serve this population. This involves a nuanced understanding of veterans' experiences, challenges, and contributions to the academic

community. This literature review delves into the intricate landscape of firearm policy, veterans and their unique health challenges, motivating factors around campus carry, and the broader public health implications of firearm access, especially in academic settings.

Literature Search Strategy

A meticulous search strategy offered a comprehensive and well-rounded overview of the topic. The strategy used for this literature review accumulated relevant literature on firearms, public health, perceptions of safety, and specific demographic groups such as veterans and ex-military personnel. The selection process for the literature review was meticulous, utilizing a variety of keywords to ensure a comprehensive coverage of the topic. Keywords included *campus carry*, *firearm policy,* and *student perspectives and experiences related to firearms on campus*. The search also focused on the *perceptions of safety and its impact on health* and *potential firearm risk mitigation, interventions, and policy recommendations*. Additionally, specific attention was given to *student veterans, veterans,* and *service members' health needs and challenges* to gather diverse insights relevant to the study's focus.

Databases Utilized for Literature Extraction

The review included a broad spectrum of keywords and search terms to achieve a nuanced and in-depth understanding of safety perceptions, firearms, and student veterans, ensuring that all critical aspects received attention. The literature search strategy for this study was comprehensive and structured methodically to encompass a wide range of relevant academic sources. The focus was primarily on peer-reviewed articles to ensure the credibility and quality of the gathered information. Additionally, the search

uncovered multiple literature reviews and meta-analyses that provide a high level of evidence by synthesizing data from multiple studies (Borsari et al., 2017; Oster et al., 2017; Pallin & Barnhorst, 2021; Price & Khubchandani, 2022; Theis et al., 2021; Verkamp, 2021; Yancey et al., 2023).

The search focused on publications from the most recent years (2015-2024) to ensure the relevance and currency of the findings. Both qualitative and quantitative articles were included to gain a well-rounded understanding of the topic. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of various research methodologies and findings. The geographical and language scope of the search focused on U.S. and English articles. This ensured that the study context was relevant to the specific campus carry setting in the United States and Texas. The number of articles found varied depending on the keyword and database. However, a substantial volume of literature was reviewed to form a robust foundation for the study.

Theoretical Foundation

Ecological systems theory and related frameworks provide a lens to understand how an individual's environment interacts with their development, behavior, and perceptions (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). These frameworks are inherently rooted in systems thinking and draw parallels with natural ecological systems. Such theories challenge the convention of viewing individuals in isolation and disconnected from their environment; instead, they emphasize the importance of examining the overlapping systems that envelop and surround them, ranging from immediate settings such as family and school to broader societal elements such as culture and politics.

One application of an ecological framework is the social-ecological model (SEM). SEM provides a holistic approach to understanding the individual and environmental factors influencing human behavior (Johnson et al., 2021). Initially developed to untangle the complex systems affecting health, researchers have evolved and applied SEM across various research domains, such as violence prevention and community health (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014).

SEM is a useful tool when considering populations such as student veterans (P. A. Morris et al., 2022). Despite the seemingly contrasting realms of the military and academia, SEM helps to bridge the gap. Analyzing student veterans' perspectives on safety and campus environments through SEM can identify connections between distinct phenomena, paving the way for multi-level interventions. The SEM is structurally layered:

- Micro/Intrapersonal level: This foundational layer delves into an individual's traits and behaviors.
- Meso/Interpersonal level: Focuses on people's close relationships and social networks, such as kinship, friendships, and colleagues.
- Exo/Institutional level: This stratum encompasses domains such as the school, workplace, and neighborhood where people live, work, and social interactions.
- Macro/Societal level: The broadest spectrum; this layer encapsulates societal influences such as religion, culture, and policy.

Perceptions of safety, as viewed through SEM, emerge as a convolution of diverse

factors interacting across these levels. This implies that impactful solutions must be comprehensive to address each stratum of the model. In most settings, people target safety education individually. However, its impact can be subdued if the organization cultivates unsafe practices. In other words, organizational safety policies might exist, but their efficacy depends on interpersonal relationships within those organizations (Lodisso, 2019).

The SEM exemplifies the interconnectedness of various environmental and individual factors that impact human behavior. Each layer of the SEM, from intrapersonal to societal, does not operate in isolation but rather in tandem with the others (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). This intertwined nature means that shifts or interventions in one layer can catalyze changes in adjacent or distant layers.

Grassroots campaigns often originate at the community or organizational level and have the potential to drive change not only within the community but also at broader societal levels. Stakeholders drive these campaigns and capture policymakers' attention, leading to more comprehensive legislative and policy reforms (Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017). Conversely, top-down reforms or societal shifts can filter down and influence community perceptions, individual behaviors, and institutional practices (Castillo et al., 2019). For example, national anti-smoking campaigns in many countries raise societal awareness, catalyze community initiatives, and change individual perceptions and behaviors related to smoking (Vallone et al., 2022).

This intricate web of SEM emphasizes the importance of a multi-layered approach to intervention and the need for stakeholders at all levels to be mindful of the

potential ripple effects of their actions. This suggests that holistic and collaborative strategies, considering their potential impacts across all SEM levels, are more likely to yield sustainable and impactful results. Given SEM's dynamic nature, consistent monitoring and assessments are crucial. Implementing interventions at various levels necessitates tracking their ripple effects throughout the system, ensuring that strategies adapt to real-world results and new challenges.

SEM provides a robust framework to place the perceptions of the safety of student veterans in the context of campus safety. Many organizations influence and shape student veterans' perceptions. Individual combat experiences and broader societal views on the military and firearms influence them. By applying the SEM, this research endeavor comprehensively examined how individual factors (such as personal experiences and mental health), relational factors (like relationships with peers and family), community factors (e.g., veterans' support networks and campus policies), and societal factors (such as media portrayal of veterans and legislative policies around firearms) interact and contribute to their safety perceptions. Thus, this model ensures a holistic understanding that captures the depth and breadth of veterans' lived experiences, thus providing richer insights and more actionable recommendations.

Literature Review

Perceptions of Safety

Actual and perceived safety is pivotal in determining individual and community health outcomes. From a public health perspective, understanding how perceptions of safety influence health is crucial to developing effective interventions and policies.

According to Maslow, safety is just above the basic needs of food, water, and sleep (Maslow et al., 1987). Like food and water, it is a fundamental layer for people to obtain belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. However, unlike food and water, safety is socially constructed (Simpson, 1996). (The debate around the social construction of food and water distribution is outside the scope of this work.) Thus, safety is understood more accurately based on people's perceptions.

A perceived lack of safety can lead to chronic stress; constantly feeling unsafe due to actual or perceived crime, unstable living conditions, or mental health issues can lead to elevated cortisol levels. Chronic stress can result in various mental health issues, including depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD (McEwen, 2008). This creates a cycle in which stress levels continue to increase and exacerbate the feeling of not being safe.

Chronic stress can manifest as a physical health problem. When sustained, elevated cortisol levels can lead to hypertension, heart disease, obesity, and other chronic conditions (Sapolsky, 2004). Furthermore, individuals who perceive their environments as unsafe might avoid outdoor physical activities, leading to sedentary lifestyles and associated health risks such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes (Lorenc et al., 2012). Students experiencing chronic stress perform worse in school (Schraml et al., 2012; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). This can lead to suicidal ideation among students (Rosiek et al., 2016). This can lead to increased alcohol or substance use as a coping mechanism (Keyes et al., 2012).

Perceived safety plays a key role in fostering social cohesion. When individuals feel safe, they are more likely to engage in community activities, form social networks, or

participate in civic duties. Strong social ties have been linked to better mental and physical health outcomes, as they offer emotional support, increase access to resources, and promote positive health behaviors (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014). Conversely, a lack of perceived safety can erode community trust, leading to social isolation and associated health risks.

Addressing safety perceptions is paramount for promoting community and individual health. While actual safety measures are essential for a community to thrive, addressing subjective feelings of safety is equally crucial, as they have direct and indirect implications for health (Kidd & Anderson, 2015). Interventions that focus on improving qualitative measures, such as the perception of safety, community trust, and community cohesion, correlate with improvements in quantitative safety measures, such as crime reduction (Kennedy et al., 1998; Saegert & Winkel, 2004). It is possible to pave the way for healthier, safer, and more resilient communities by fostering environments in which people feel safe and where they are safer.

Perceptions of safety influence health behaviors. Many people who carry firearms cite fear of crime victimization as a significant reason for carrying a weapon. Whether this phenomenon translates to student veterans' perceptions of safety and motivation to carry firearms is unknown. Counterintuitively, fear of crime victimization does not predict firearm ownership (Billings, 2020).

Firearms as a Policy and Public Health Issue

Firearm-related violence is a significant public health concern in the United States. Firearms are responsible for significant morbidity and mortality in the United

States (Goldstick et al., 2021). Given the morbidity and mortality associated with firearms, public health professionals and policymakers should have access to comprehensive data and research funding to guide effective interventions and policymaking. However, there is a noticeable gap between data and funding (Gurrey et al., 2021).

Firearm-related research is challenging for several reasons. The lack of funding has historically been a primary impediment to research obstacles, although funding has slowly increased (Weir, 2023). Reliable databases on firearm injuries and deaths are also rare (Rowhani-Rahbar et al., 2019). Many databases used for firearms violence research have issues with data accuracy, particularly concerning validity and reliability.

Communities with more firearms experience higher violent crime rates (Donohue et al., 2019). There are several theories regarding why this occurs. Berkowitz & LePage (1967) found that people exposed to firearms exhibited more aggression, which the researchers dubbed the “weapon effect.” Further studies have shown that drivers with guns display more aggressive behavior on the road (Bushman et al., 2017). Another aspect of the weapons effect is that people can identify guns as quickly as they make more atavistic threats, such as spiders and snakes (Blanchette, 2006). Numerous studies have supported the weapon effect, indicating that merely seeing weapons can incite aggressive thoughts and behaviors (Benjamin et al., 2018). This supports the continued research on weapons’ influence on social interactions, especially in real-world settings.

Despite its high morbidity and mortality rates, gun violence remains an under-researched topic. It receives much lower funding than issues of similar public health

significance. While gun violence has a mortality rate comparable to that of sepsis, the research funding it received was less than 1% of that allocated to sepsis, leading to a significantly lower number of publications (Gurrey et al., 2021). Since 1998, gun violence-related research has declined by 60%. This lack of research makes policy recommendations difficult and establishes a strong need for exploratory research.

The gap in research funding stems from an amendment to the CDC's budget in response to the research funded by the CDC that indicated that firearms are correlated with a heightened risk of homicide and suicide (Kellermann et al., 1993). Following lobbying efforts by the NRA, Congressman Jay Dickey introduced an amendment (colloquially known as the Dickey Amendment) stipulating that the agency could not use funds to "advocate or promote gun control" (Jamieson, 2013). Subsequent restrictions also affected NIH funding. These measures do not explicitly ban firearm research. However, there was a significant "chilling effect," which resulted in a significant decline in state and federal funding in this area of research (Kellermann & Rivara, 2013).

This history underscores the urgent need to repeal and advocate consistent financial backing and leadership from academic institutions and the private sector to bridge the research gap created by this 30-year gap in funding. The absence of consistent funding poses a significant barrier, deterring dedicated researchers from specializing in gun violence prevention. The public health community has made several recommendations, including improving research, facilitating cross-disciplinary collaborations, and promoting firearm policy discussions (Branas et al., 2017).

Within the multifaceted dynamics of the US firearm policy debate, there are two

broad positions. Opponents of gun control argue for the enduring cultural symbolism of firearms in the US, which extends beyond their practical utility. In this cultural view, firearms symbolize freedom, self-reliance, and personal safety (Metzl, 2019). In contrast, gun control proponents argue that firearms represent a significant public health threat and a stagnant, ineffectual, and weak political system. As discussed earlier, the scant available evidence supports the latter position. However, evidence for specific gun control measures is often weak (Lee et al., 2017) because of the research difficulties discussed earlier.

This cultural polarity complicates the feasibility of gun control measures, which can gain widespread acceptance. Within the US, a "culture of fear" underpins both views on firearms, suggesting that an effective firearm policy is secondary to deeply rooted fears and beliefs about personal safety (Pierre, 2019). Approaching firearm policy with a "harm reduction" mindset rather than a consequentialist approach may result in more policy movement in this domain (Katz, 2021).

There is a potential path forward by acknowledging the nuances and complexities of public attitudes towards firearms. Researchers and policymakers should focus policy efforts on widely accepted and evidence-based measures such as universal background checks (UBC) (Kaufman et al., 2020), "red flag" laws (Dalafave, 2020), and safety campaigns aimed at firearm storage and handling (Dittus et al., 2023).

Caution is needed when crafting firearm policies, as some policies have led to significant racial disparities in the consequences of illegal firearm possession. It is unknown how many people illegally carry firearms, but it is known that enforcement

disproportionately falls on people of color (Olson, 2022). While these laws are often seen as stopping "violent criminals," they often incarcerate people with previous nonviolent drug offenses with draconian mandatory prison sentences. These laws do not consider the nuanced social contexts that drive people to carry firearms. This finding reinforced the need for a careful discussion of these topics so that existing disparities are not exacerbated.

Policies allowing firearms on campus can significantly impact the perceptions of safety among students, faculty, and staff (Somers et al., 2020). Even if incidents are rare, knowing that individuals might carry concealed weapons negatively influences student veterans' perceptions of safety and well-being (Hassett & Kim, 2021).

Student Veterans

Veterans are a diverse population with shared experiences, physical and mental health challenges, and other needs that demand specialized services from dedicated institutions during their transition to civilian life (Beder, 2016). The gap between civilians and soldiers has been acknowledged throughout history. These gaps often necessitate specialized services and care for this population. The roots of veteran care in the United States can be traced back to the law passed by the Plymouth Colony in 1636 to provide exceptional support for veterans (Tarr, 1997).

One major failure in veteran support services is the treatment of veterans as a monolith without individual support needs (Meffert et al., 2019). Veterans have diverse military experiences and diverse perspectives on their experiences (Hitch et al., 2023). Higher education is an important tool in identity renegotiation for veterans transitioning

from the military (Hinton, 2020; Thompson, 2017) but higher education has also fallen short here (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Borsari et al., 2017).

Many veterans have physical disabilities, mental health conditions, military sexual trauma (MST) related conditions, PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other trauma-related disorders stemming from the intense physical and emotional stresses characteristic of military service (Nichter et al., 2019; Oster et al., 2017). Long-term effects on mental and physical well-being are profound. It is important to remember that not all veterans' health issues arise from combat exposure. MST can result in lifelong disability (Nichter et al., 2022).

Veterans face various multifaceted challenges such as securing employment, navigating civilian and VA healthcare systems for managing physical and mental health needs, and adapting to a new social structure after leaving the military (McCormick et al., 2019). Additionally, many encounter obstacles in translating military skills to civilian roles, bridging educational gaps, and finding stable housing. Compounding these challenges are dynamics such as strained familial and social connections, potential identity crises, legal entanglements, financial adjustments, and heightened rates of substance abuse.

In addition to mental health concerns, many veterans have significant physical health concerns. Many veterans have experienced some form of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Repeated TBIs can also lead to cognitive deficits. This type of injury is common in veterans of recent conflicts because of the specifics of recent conflicts. A history of TBI is associated with an increased risk of all-cause mortality, suicide ideation/suicide

attempts, and depression and decreases the likelihood of a smooth transition back to civilian life (Greer et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2022; Morissette et al., 2021).

Transitioning from military to civilian and academic life is a complex process for veterans, especially those with physical, emotional, or mental health issues such as PTSD (Morin, 2011). Estimates suggest that half of the veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts deal with PTSD, with some also grappling with substance abuse and depression (Nichter et al., 2019; Sokol et al., 2021). Resources and support services tailored specifically for veterans are crucial for assisting them in navigating the academic environment, adapting to new social norms, and managing their health conditions. Researchers have demonstrated the efficacy of peer mentoring, academic accommodation, and mental health services in supporting veterans effectively (P. Morris et al., 2019).

Higher education is indispensable for facilitating veterans' transition to civilian life, as educational attainment positively predicts successful societal re-entry. Colleges and universities must create welcoming and supportive environments for the veterans' unique needs and challenges. They are morally obligated to serve all their students' needs but are also legally mandated by the ADA and SLA to serve their student veterans' needs. This process involves more than waving the (Zeoli et al., 2016) flag of being a "military-friendly" institution. It means providing services, mental health support, and campus safety policies written with student veterans in mind. Creating a supportive academic landscape not only aids veterans' personal and educational development but also enriches the campus community by fostering diversity and inclusion.

Enhancing access to mental health services for veterans can help address underlying issues that might influence firearm-related risks (Graziano et al., 2021). Promoting safe firearm storage practices can reduce the risk of impulsive acts, especially in households with children or individuals at risk of self-harm (Dittus et al., 2023). Educating veterans about the risks associated with firearm access, especially regarding mental health challenges and intimate partner violence (IPV), can promote safer behaviors (Katz, 2021). These findings suggest that the veteran population is susceptible to behavioral changes.

The stigma associated with mental health issues in both military and civilian contexts can deter veterans from seeking help they need (Botero Jr et al., 2020; Pescosolido et al., 2021). In military culture, strength and resilience are highly valued, and admitting mental health struggles can be perceived as signs of weakness. Unfortunately, this mindset often carries over into their civilian lives, making it difficult for veterans seeking support or utilizing available resources.

In higher education, student veterans have unique strengths, including communication, diversity, leadership, and drive (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020), they also face barriers in their academic pursuits. Student veterans' propensity to carry firearms on campus can create a disconnect from faculty, students, and staff (Ruoppila & Butters, 2021; Somers et al., 2020), which could lead to further alienation from existing physical and mental health needs. There are unique social challenges for veterans to integrate into the campus culture.

As discussed, transitioning from military to civilian life, especially to an academic

environment, can exacerbate pre-existing physical and mental health concerns of student veterans. Universities and colleges, with their unique social dynamics and academic pressures, can inadvertently trigger or intensify symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression in veterans (Albanesi et al., 2022). Crowded campuses or classroom discussions can evoke traumatic memories for veterans, impacting their perceptions of safety and well-being.

Veterans often feel like outsiders on college campuses and deal with various challenges, including building relationships with non-veteran peers (K. C. Jones, 2017). Veterans are often nontraditional students, and age differences from traditional college students contribute to difficulty in forming connections with non-veteran students. These feelings of separation can create barriers to accessing campus services. This necessitates a nuanced understanding of student veteran's perspectives (Falkey, 2016). This understanding can be complex for faculty, staff, and students as they may have no frame of reference for veterans' experiences.

The limited understanding and awareness among university faculty, staff, and students regarding the distinct challenges student veterans encounter can inadvertently contribute to their feelings of being marginalized and estranged. Such a gap in comprehension can stem from preconceived notions about veterans or simply a lack of exposure to veterans (Falkey, 2016). For student veterans, this gap can manifest as a sense of not belonging or feeling out of place in an environment where their military experiences and the associated challenges might not be readily understood or acknowledged (Schroeder & Perez, 2022). Institutions need to take positive steps towards

bringing student veterans into the student body rather than expecting them to self-integrate.

There are straightforward and practical measures academic institutions can adopt to bridge this gap. Faculty can proactively provide trigger warnings for potentially distressing content, allowing student veterans to be mentally prepared or make informed decisions about their participation. There is also evidence that establishing support groups tailored explicitly to veterans can offer a safe space to share their experiences, seek advice, and build a community within a larger academic setting (Borsari et al., 2017).

By taking such steps, universities and colleges can foster a more inclusive environment, ensuring that student veterans receive the academic support they need and feel valued and understood within the campus community. It is also essential to recognize that while many veterans face these challenges, they also bring many experiences, perspectives, and skills to the academic table (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020). Their leadership abilities, discipline, and diverse worldviews can enrich classroom discussions and significantly contribute to the campus community.

Veterans are often associated with firearm proficiency, and student veterans were included in this assessment. When asked about this group being armed on campus, most students, faculty, and staff members reported increased feelings of safety. The efficacy of this population is questionable as the experience service members have certainly included firearm-related skill sets, but most service members have served in administrative or support jobs. A commonly cited statistic is that the modern United States military has a three-to-one ratio of support for combat arms personnel (tooth-to-tail ratio [T3R])

(McGrath, 2007). It is also questionable to place the responsibility of protecting the campus from violence on the shoulders of any student. Student veterans' proficiency may be moot, as armed guards or other armed school personnel are not associated with a reduction in the severity of school violence episodes (Peterson et al., 2021).

The training and familiarity with firearms that veterans acquire and the cultural affinity for guns, juxtaposed with the mental health challenges many endure, create a complex scenario. Firearm-related sporting activities can foster communities and serve as therapeutic outlets for veterans (Evans et al., 2020). Countering this point is the well-established relationship between firearm ownership and increased suicide risk across various populations (Martínez-Alés et al., 2021), which holds for veterans (Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2020). Regularly carrying firearms outside the home and storage practices associated with regularly carrying firearms outside the home are associated with suicide among veterans (Dempsey et al., 2019). Veterans have a higher suicide rate than the general population, and access to lethal means, such as firearms, is thought to increase the likelihood of suicide completion (Bossarte et al., 2021; Theis et al., 2021).

Veterans experienced higher rates of many forms of violence. Veterans (mainly women) are at higher risk of firearm-related IPV (Rossi et al., 2020). The prevalence of IPV is higher in military populations, with veterans showing a higher likelihood of IPV perpetration than active-duty servicemembers (Kwan et al., 2020). The presence of firearms in households with a history of IPV can escalate conflicts and increase the risk of fatal outcomes (Zeoli et al., 2016). The combination of PTSD, other common veteran

mental health conditions, and firearm access exacerbates these risks. This highlights the importance of considering violence and its correlates, such as firearms, when studying this population.

In addressing student veterans' needs, institutions must balance providing necessary support for their mental and emotional well-being with recognizing and valuing the strengths and experiences they bring. Academic institutions can be pivotal in facilitating student veterans' successful transition, growth, and healing by fostering an environment of understanding, empathy, and respect.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research is invaluable for exploring phenomena embedded in social, organizational, and personal environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Finlay, 2009; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Unlike quantitative research, which requires numerical data analysis and strips data of its context, qualitative approaches maintain datum within their contextual framework, ensuring a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study by interpreting them in their natural settings. Qualitative research enables researchers to provide detailed descriptions of a person's or people's lived experiences, including how they perceive contextual factors that influence their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the data.

There are several modes of inquiry in qualitative research. Phenomenology is one such approach that fits this present research. The philosophical framework underpins qualitative research as a valid form of inquiry that is most associated with Edmund

Husserl's work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This is also a specific method of qualitative inquiry. The phenomenological approach is the qualitative design best used when depth of detail, rather than generalizability, is required (van Manen & van Manen, 2021).

This study assumed a subjective nature of experience and perception (Muscari, 1985). Qualitative research allows this subjectivity to be explored, emphasizing the importance of understanding participants' perspectives. The researcher focused on how student veterans interpret their experiences, the meanings they assigned to them, and how these interpretations influenced their behaviors and perceptions of safety.

Multiple options were evaluated to select a suitable methodological approach for this research, primarily ethnography, action research, and grounded theory. The research problem and questions guided the methodology to ensure alignment. Among these, ethnography was the most strongly considered before being rejected. This decision was influenced by the recognition that while cultural and community factors are significant in the studied phenomenon, the ethical implications of the researcher becoming embedded in any student community were overly complex for this research endeavor. In addition to these methodological considerations, more materialist constraints related to time and resources were considered. Phenomenology was ultimately selected as the best method to serve the needs and limitations of this endeavor.

Summary and Conclusions

The effects of campus carry transcend the boundaries of campus. The literature underscores the multifaceted nature of firearms for public health. The implications for public health are incredibly profound. As a demographic, veterans face unique challenges

related to physical and mental health and reintegration into civilian life, and there is strong evidence of increased firearm-related health risks.

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) provides a comprehensive lens to understand the myriad factors influencing firearm violence, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to address the issue.

Firearms pose a threat to the safety of communities and are an important topic in public health. Their presence can exacerbate conflicts, and statistics on firearm-related fatalities and injuries underscore the gravity of this issue. The evidence strongly supports this position. Navigating the landscape of firearm policies is difficult due to the deeply entrenched cultural and social dynamics surrounding firearms. In many communities, firearms are seen not only as tools for personal protection but also as symbols of heritage, freedom, or self-reliance. The totemic nature of firearms makes policy discussion very difficult. Focusing on areas of broad agreement and pursuing a “harm reduction” approach is the best course of action.

The stark findings around the mental and physical health challenges many veterans grapple with, coupled with the connections to firearms within the military and veterans’ community, spotlight the need for a more empathetic and nuanced approach. Engaging student veterans in open conversations about their feelings of safety and how they interlink with the decision to carry firearms is not just about crafting informed policies but also about creating a supportive and understanding academic environment. It is about recognizing and valuing their experiences while acknowledging and addressing the complex emotions underpinning their decisions around firearms. The topic demands a

departure from the prevailing tone-deaf policy discourse to a more pluralistic, inclusive, and empathetic discussion. It necessitates creating spaces where student veterans can express their perspectives, and policy can be built with their unique perspectives in mind.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of campus safety among student veterans in Texas who conceal carry firearms on campus (so-called campus carry) and to explore student veterans' experiences and decision-making processes, focusing on the relationship between perceptions of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers) and the likelihood of carrying firearms on college campuses to provide an evidentiary basis for policymakers and stakeholders (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The phenomenological design was used because of its suitability to capture the depth of individual experiences, which is crucial for understanding the unique perspectives of student veterans in this context (Moustakas, 1994).

This chapter outlines the research design rationale, details the role of the researcher and the chosen methodology, and explores other methodologies (explaining why they were rejected), participant recruitment, the instruments employed, data collection, and the data analysis plan. Several critical aspects of research integrity, including trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reliability are also discussed. The ethical considerations are thoroughly explored and discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary that encapsulates the key points.

Research Design and Rationale

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to understand student veterans' perceptions of campus safety and how that influences their firearm-carrying behaviors. The two research questions at the heart of this research endeavor are:

- RQ 1: What are the perceptions of student veterans of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers)?
- RQ 2: How do student veterans' perceptions of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers) influence their firearm carrying on college/university campuses?

Given the experiential nature of the central phenomena under investigation, qualitative research is well suited to this research endeavor.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher conducting this study, I must acknowledge and reflect upon my background, experiences, and potential biases. My experience, both personal and professional, influences my perspectives and approach to research. Being transparent is crucial for maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the study. I attempted to elucidate any personal and professional relationships with participants, emphasizing supervisory or instructor relationships involving power over the participants.

My role as the researcher covered all research activities for this research endeavor. This included recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and being the primary point of contact for any queries or concerns they may have. Throughout these interactions, I strove to build rapport and trust with the participants, ensuring they felt comfortable and respected during the research process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Safeguarding the trust and confidentiality of participants is of paramount importance to me.

I was responsible for all aspects of data collection and the analysis of the data

collected. I was the primary data collection instrument, utilizing my observation, communication, and interpretation skills to gather rich, in-depth insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). My interactions, perceptions, and interpretations play a crucial role in understanding the nuances of the subject matter, making my personal engagement and reflexivity essential components of the research methodology.

Throughout the research, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity, constantly examining my biases, beliefs, and reactions to the data. This self-awareness is crucial in phenomenological research, where the researcher's perspective can significantly influence the interpretation of the data. This reflexive practice included regular journaling and discussions with peer researchers.

My role as a researcher extends beyond the confines of the study itself. It includes dissemination of all findings and advocating for positive social change. I had to ensure that the findings are presented accurately, responsibly, and in a manner that respects the experiences and voices of the participants. I also ensured that participants are protected and that the highest ethical standards are followed.

I serve as faculty at a community college in Texas. This educational setting exposes me to a diverse student population, enriching my experience and understanding of various educational and social backgrounds. To uphold the highest ethical standards in my research, I have deliberately decided to exclude any students from my college as participants in this study. This exclusion is a precautionary measure to prevent potential ethical dilemmas that might stem from the inherent power dynamics in student–teacher relationships. It is crucial to maintain clear boundaries between my professional

responsibilities as an educator and my research activities to avoid conflicts of interest and ensure the integrity of the research process. This emphasizes the importance of avoiding any situation where coercion or perceived coercion might influence a participant's decision to participate in the study. In summary, my role as the researcher is multifaceted and encompassed a range of responsibilities, from direct engagement with participants to the analysis and dissemination of findings. I committed to ethical conduct and deeply respect and gratitude for the participants.

Methodology

This section outlines the approach used in this study, including the rationale behind participant selection, the instruments used for data collection, and the methods employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. This study was conducted to understand student veterans' perceptions of safety on campus and how that influences their behaviors around carrying firearms. To accomplish this, student veterans were recruited for semistructured interviews conducted via video teleconferencing (VTC) software (Google Meet) until data saturation was met. This approach allowed a systematic examination of personal narratives, focusing on the lived experiences of student veterans as they pertain to the research questions.

Participant Selection Logic

The population of interest was student veterans who can carry firearms on campus in Texas. Participants were selected using volunteer and snowball sampling methods. These approaches were chosen because they effectively recruit individuals with specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p.

189; Palinkas et al., 2015). In this case, the study sampled student veterans in Texas who can conceal carry firearms on their college or university campus. This allowed for data collection relevant to the current research endeavor.

Instrumentation

The primary data collection instruments are semistructured interviews conducted by the author/researcher. The interviews were guided by a protocol developed from the author's personal experiences as a student veteran who has carried firearms in an educational environment, supplemented by insights from relevant literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The goal is to conduct fifteen interviews, with the possibility of more or less depending on ensuring data saturation. These interviews were conducted via VTC with concurrent analysis. The interviews were recorded for transcription and subsequent analysis. The interview protocol outlined in the appendix has been designed to elicit in-depth responses pertinent to the research questions. This approach ensures that the instruments are sufficiently robust to explore the research questions effectively.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to test the proposed research approach, participant selection logic, and data collection instruments. The primary aim of this pilot was to evaluate whether the semi-structured interview protocol and the participant recruitment strategies would effectively capture the perceptions of campus safety among student veterans who carry firearms on campus. By focusing on this smaller-scale study, adjustments could be made to ensure that the final research methods were valid, reliable, and suitable for broader research applications.

The population for the pilot study was consistent with the primary research, targeting student veterans from Texas who carry concealed firearms on campus. Volunteer and snowball sampling methods were employed, enabling the researcher to specifically recruit participants with relevant experiences, as suggested by Creswell & Creswell (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) and Palinkas et al. (2015).

The data collection instrument used in the pilot study was a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researcher. This protocol was informed by both the researcher's personal experiences as a student veteran who had carried firearms in educational settings and relevant literature on campus safety and firearm carrying. The pilot study aimed to conduct at least five interviews through VTC software (Google Meet). This allowed for efficient data collection while ensuring participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences in a secure environment. Each interview was recorded for transcription.

This pilot assessed the interview protocol for its clarity and robustness in eliciting in-depth responses aligned with the research questions. Adjustments were made to the pacing of interviews and specific phrasing of certain questions to ensure participants fully understood the focus of each question. The feedback from the pilot study provided confidence that the protocol was appropriately designed to meet the objectives of the primary study.

Recruitment, Participation Selection, and Data Collection

Recruitment

Recruiting potential participants involved contacting campus student veteran

organizations and other veterans' affinity groups in Texas, as these organizations had direct contact with the population of interest. Additional recruiting through public places frequented by student veterans and social media platforms where student veterans frequent was also utilized. These channels provided access to a diverse pool of student veterans with varying backgrounds and experiences.

A comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and data saturation guided the sample size. Efforts were made to recruit a surplus of participants, given the likelihood of a low response rate (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) to research invitations. Including a diverse participant population was also essential to capture various experiences and perspectives regarding campus carry. Participants self-scheduled an interview using an online scheduling tool.

Data Collection

Interviews for this study were conducted and recorded using Google Meet to ensure accuracy and facilitate transcription. If follow-up interviews are necessary, they were conducted using the same tools and techniques. Each interview was transcribed automatically by speech-to-text software. Once machine transcription was complete, the video recording and machine transcription were compared to verify the accuracy of the transcription, and corrections were made as needed to ensure fidelity. The transcripts reflect the participants' exact responses, including verbatim, to preserve the integrity of their responses.

Data Analysis Plan

Data was analyzed using a thorough and systematic approach. The initial analysis

began during transcription (Saldaña, 2021). Transcription was done immediately after each interview to maintain accuracy and immediacy. The transcript was then sent to the interviewee and imported into Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Excel is a product primarily designed as a spreadsheet but has many features that lend themselves to qualitative data analysis.

The coding process was iterative, starting with a careful open coding approach described by Creswell & Creswell (2023). This approach involves segmenting the data into manageable parts and examining the responses for words or phrases directly relevant to the research questions. Each transcript was re-examined to ensure no significant data was missed. Following this, thematic coding was employed to identify the most frequent and significant concepts, helping to condense the data into distinct categories. Microsoft Excel was utilized throughout this process for efficient management and organization of the data.

Discrepant cases or transcription errors were handled and documented, ensuring that only accurate and verified data was included in the analysis. This meticulous approach ensured that the analysis was grounded in the participants' experiences and perceptions, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Four elements of trustworthiness are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Trustworthiness was established through carefully and systematically applying methodological techniques (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). These procedures are

fully explained in this section.

Credibility was established through member checks, saturation, and triangulation in the data collection effort. Ravitch & Carl (2019) described that Triangulation involves examining data at different times, from various places, and with diverse individuals. During interviews, the essence of answers from notes was repeated to the interviewees, allowing them to verify or add to their responses. This immediate verification ensured that participant's responses were accurately captured. Secondarily, the participants were provided access to the interview transcription for review. This allowed participants to verify the entirety of their responses, further reinforcing the credibility of the data.

Transferability was established by obtaining detailed and contextualized descriptions of the setting, participants, and experiences during the data collection (Shenton, 2004). This contextualized the phenomenon and allowed the findings to be applied to similar settings. Recruiting a panel of participants with diverse experiences enhances the potential for the findings to resonate with additional contexts. This approach not only strengthens the study's transferability but also aids in understanding the specific phenomena under investigation.

Dependability was addressed by presenting all participants with the same control questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Maintaining clear notes during interviews, transcription, and coding aided in dependability. This documentation can be a valuable reference for future researchers investigating the same or similar domains. Through triangulation, member checking, and maintaining reflexivity, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established in this study, ensuring a rigorous and

trustworthy exploration of student veterans' perceptions.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures were adhered to and aligned with Walden University's ethical standards. This research sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before collecting data. This process involves completing and submitting Form A (Description of Data and Partner Sites) during the University Research Reviewer (URR) phase. This form details the nature of the study, data collection methods, and the potential participant sites. Consistent with Walden University's guidelines, no contact was made with potential participants or organizations, nor were any interviews conducted until IRB approval was obtained. Walden University's approval number for this study is 07-16-24-1120695

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, there are many ethical considerations. This study explores perspectives that, if disclosed publicly, could potentially impact the professional or personal lives of the participants. Therefore, ensuring the anonymity and complete confidentiality of participant information was a critical component of this study's ethical procedures. Participants were reassured at the beginning and end of each interview that their personal information and the data they provided remained confidential and anonymous. Written consent for voluntary participation was obtained from each participant before the interview.

Participants were informed at the start of the interview that they could discontinue their participation in the research at any time. The interview was not conducted if a participant did not provide written and verbal consent. Additionally, considering the

potential emotional impact of some topics that could be discussed, participants were informed about available mental health services via a flyer before the interview. Contact details for the National Crisis Line and other relevant mental health services were provided to all participants. The researcher also received training as a combat medic in recognizing behavioral health symptoms, particularly PTSD-related symptoms.

Secure data storage was maintained electronically in an encrypted Proton Drive account, accessible only to the researcher. Per Walden University's data retention policy, all data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the interviews. This includes both digital files, which will be permanently deleted, and any physical files, which will be shredded. By adhering to these ethical procedures, this research aims to protect the participants while providing a secure and respectful environment for them to share their experiences and opinions on campus carry.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology used for this qualitative phenomenological study. It aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of campus safety among student veterans in the Central Texas area who carry firearms on campus. This was accomplished through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The textual data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. With careful adherence to ethical guidelines, this approach aims to provide a deep understanding of the complex dynamics influencing student veterans' perceptions of campus safety and decisions related to campus carry.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the background and findings from this qualitative study exploring student veterans' perceptions of campus safety and their decisions to carry firearms on college campuses. Using a phenomenological approach, this study captured the lived experiences of student veterans in Texas, focusing on how their perceptions of safety, shaped by military service, influence their choice to carry concealed firearms in an academic environment. The research questions in this study were:

- RQ 1: What are the perceptions of student veterans of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers)?
- RQ 2: How do student veterans' perceptions of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers) influence their firearm carrying on college/university campuses?

This chapter begins by outlining the pilot study, setting, and demographic characteristics of the participants. It then details the data collection and analysis methods, providing transparency into the processes used to interpret the experiences of student veteran participants. Emphasis is placed on maintaining the trustworthiness of the findings, ensuring that credibility, transferability, and dependability are consistently addressed throughout the research.

The study results align with the research questions, highlighting key themes from the data. These themes provide insight into how student veterans' unique experiences in military and civilian life intersect with their sense of safety and the decision to carry

firearms on campus. Ultimately, this chapter offers an understanding of the factors shaping the participants' decision to carry firearms.

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted to test the research approach, participant selection logic, and data collection instruments. The primary aim of this pilot was to evaluate whether the semistructured interview protocol and the participant recruitment strategies would effectively capture the perceptions of campus safety among carrying student veterans. By focusing on this smaller-scale study, adjustments could be made to ensure that the final research methods were valid, reliable, and suitable for broader research.

Initial recruitment for the pilot study focused on reaching student veterans who conceal carry on campus in the Central Texas region. Recruitment efforts involved outreach through social media (Reddit, Discord, Facebook), veteran-affiliated campus organizations in Texas (Student Veterans Association, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars), flyers distributed at businesses popular with veterans (coffee shops and restaurants near VA facilities and firearm stores), and supplemented by word-of-mouth by participants. Participants were provided with the pilot consent form and asked to provide written consent via email to confirm their pilot study eligibility.

The recruitment process for this pilot study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines approved by the Walden University IRB. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights through a detailed consent form provided in advance. They were required to confirm their eligibility and consent via email before participating. Recruitment materials clearly stated that participation was voluntary and

confidential, without penalties for declining or withdrawing.

Recruitment was initially poor, with only one successful interview. Three interviews were canceled when the researcher became concerned that the participants were not honest about their background and did not meet eligibility criteria. The analysis did not include these transcripts because the interview was canceled before any protocol questions were asked. Twelve interviews were scheduled, but the participants did not arrive at the scheduled time, and the meeting was canceled after 15 minutes of waiting. Further recommendations for recruiting via social media were discussed in Chapter 5.

A request was made with Walden IRB for a change of procedures to address the recruitment difficulties. The region was expanded from Central Texas to the entire state of Texas. Additionally, all student veterans, not just those who conceal carry on campus, would be included. This request was approved via email on 10/11/2024.

After this change, recruitment improved, and five interviews were completed for the pilot. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, member-checked, and then analyzed to assess the effectiveness of the questions in capturing perceptions of safety and firearm motivations. The only changes to the interview protocol were made when the participant pool was expanded to include all student veterans in Texas, including those who do not carry, to ensure the questions were applicable to all participants. Specifically, Questions D6 and IC3 were modified for respondents who do not carry firearms on campus.

Data gathered from the pilot interviews demonstrates that the questions effectively elicited responses related to the central research questions of the main study: perceptions of campus safety and factors influencing firearm carrying. While only five

interviews were conducted, these provided consistent and recurring themes across responses, including perceptions of campus safety, motivations for carrying or not carrying firearms, and the influence of military experience on safety concerns. The repetition of key ideas, such as the role of campus safety infrastructure in making carrying decisions and the frequent discussion of "transition," indicated that no new substantive insights were emerging. This consistency suggests that the interview questions effectively elicited the information necessary to address the research questions, supporting the conclusion that data saturation was reached within this sample. Further interviews in the main study verified and expanded on these themes to ensure comprehensive representation.

Setting

This study recruited student veterans in Texas, where campus carry policies permit licensed individuals to carry concealed firearms on college and university campuses. These institutions serve a diverse student population, including many military-affiliated students, such as student veterans utilizing their educational benefits under the GI Bill. The geographical focus on Texas is particularly relevant, as Texas is one of the states that enacted campus carry legislation, requiring public colleges and universities to allow concealed handguns in most areas. This policy environment provided a unique backdrop for understanding how student veterans navigate the academic setting and the responsibilities of carrying firearms.

Student veterans who participated in the study were enrolled in various academic programs across various institutions, ranging from community colleges to large public

universities. The participants were older than traditional students, and several had multiple combat deployments during their military careers, influencing their perceptions of safety and security now that they have transitioned to civilian life. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the personal nature of the experiences discussed, interviews were conducted virtually using secure VTC software, allowing participants to select a comfortable and private location to participate. This approach not only ensured confidentiality but also allowed the participants to feel more at ease discussing their experiences with carrying firearms in an academic environment.

Demographics

The demographics collected included age, gender, time in service, combat deployments, and firearm-carrying behavior. The participants' demographics were collected to protect their identities due to the sensitive nature of the topics under investigation. Half of the participants self-reported carrying firearms on campus every day or almost every day. Sixty-six percent of the participants were male, and the remaining 44% were female. The typical breakdown of gender in the active military is 83% male and 17% female (Heinecken, 2024) compared to the undergraduate population of 43% male and 57% female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Three-quarters (75%) of the participants reported at least one deployment. The time in service ranged from 4–10 years, with a median time in service of 7.1 years. The ages ranged from 27–38, with a median age of 31.6.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participants	Age	Gender	Branch	Time in Service	Combat Deployments	Carry
1	27	Male	Army	4	Yes	Yes
2	29	Male	Air Force	6	No	Yes
3	32	Male	Army	8	Yes	No
4	34	Female	Army	8	Yes	No
5	34	Male	Navy	8	Yes	No
6	38	Male	Navy	10	No	Yes
7	30	Female	Marine Corps	8	Yes	Yes
8	32	Male	Marine Corps	8	Yes	No
9	34	Male	Army	8	Yes	Yes
10	28	Female	Army	5	Yes	No
11	28	Female	Coast Guard	5	No	Yes
12	33	Male	Army	8	Yes	No

Data Collection

Data collection was accomplished using semistructured interviews. The interviews were conducted through the VTC software Google Meet and recorded using the built-in recording and transcription features. Participants were recruited through flyers posted on social media (Reddit, Discord, Facebook), emails and flyers at veteran-affiliated campus organizations in Texas (Student Veterans Association, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars), flyers distributed at businesses popular with veterans (coffee shops and restaurants near VA facilities and firearm stores), and supplemented by word-of-mouth by participants (snowball sampling). Participants who contacted me were provided with the consent form and asked to provide consent via email and confirm their eligibility for the study. The participants were then asked to self-schedule the interview when they were somewhere quiet and private to protect their

information and facilitate open, transparent discussion.

Each interview began with an explanation of the nature and purpose of the study. I discussed the consent form and the mental health resources available to the participants through their schools and the VA. The participants were asked if they understood the consent form and to reconfirm their consent.

The original recruitment goal was 15 participants. After reviewing the collected data and in consultation with the committee it was determined that saturation had been met after 12 participants. Transcripts were machine generated by Google Meet and manually reviewed for accuracy. The transcript was then edited only to add context (define military colloquialisms, define acronyms, etc.), remove any identifying information, or references to the college or university.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thorough and systematic approach adapted from established methods. The initial analysis began during transcription (Saldaña, 2021). Transcription was done automatically after each interview and reviewed manually to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then imported into Microsoft Excel for analysis. Microsoft Excel is a product primarily designed for use as a spreadsheet but has many features that lend themselves to qualitative data analysis. Data analysis was conducted manually using the method described by Creswell and Creswell (2023). This method has six steps: organize the data, familiarize yourself with the data, code, generate initial themes, describe the themes, interpret the meaning of the data. A secondary process to link this analysis to the research questions to ensure data collection could adequately

answer the research questions at hand. This entire process was iterative and began with the first interview and continued until Chapter 4 was finished.

The interview transcripts and other data (notes taken during interviews, demographic information, pre/post-interview reflexive journals) and were organized entered in a Microsoft Excel Workbook with individual spreadsheets for different categories of data. The complete interviews were input as discreet entries. Each interview was also broken down by interview question to enable cross interview matrix analysis.

I began by reading each transcript and my associated notes as they were completed several times in different settings. This reading was done through the phenomenological lens looking for how student veterans experience the phenomenon of campus safety (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Notes of repeated concepts and words were taken during this initial reading phase to serve as a foundation for the coding process.

I added preliminary codes using the open coding method described by Creswell and Creswell (2023) in each section by writing a descriptive word or concept in the adjacent column and highlighting the relevant data chunk. Each subsequent interview would be read with an eye for earlier codes. Repeated codes were given simple definitions to further refine this process. Codes were then counted and accessed for relevance to the research questions (Table 2). Codes were grouped and refined into categories. These categories were refined into preliminary themes.

Table 2

Code Frequency Table

Code	Contributing Participants $n = 12$	Data Chunks $N = 268$
Budget	3	8
Communication	4	10
Community	5	12
Constant Vigilance	6	15
Crime Victimization	3	7
De-escalation	4	9
Desire for Transition	5	11
Escalation risk	5	14
Fragility of Safety	6	13
Gender Based Violence	3	6
Infrastructure	4	9
Institutional Trust	4	8
Interpersonal Conflicts	3	7
Lack of Awareness	5	10
Media Influence	3	8
Mental Health	6	16
Open/Large Campus	4	9
Peace of Mind	4	10
Perceived Gaps	5	13
Personal Responsibility	5	12
Personal Safety	5	15
Readiness/Preparedness	5	14
Reassurance	4	9
Stigma	4	10
Substance Abuse	3	6

Preliminary themes were analyzed using a logic model to ensure alignment with research questions. Commonalities were identified across preliminary themes and clustered by concept. These preliminary themes were grouped together to reduce redundancy and enhance descriptive depth. The research questions were also broken into component parts to ensure each aspect of the framework was being met. This process is illustrated in the following figures.

Figure 1

Student Veterans Who Conceal Carry Are Concerned About Campus Safety Logic Model

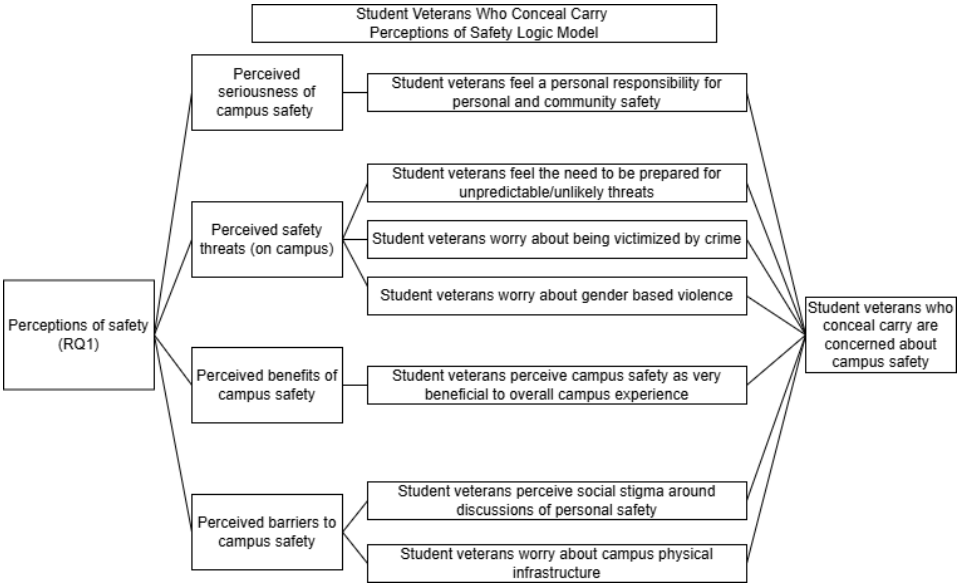


Figure 2

Noncarrying Student Veterans Feel Safe on Campus Logic Model

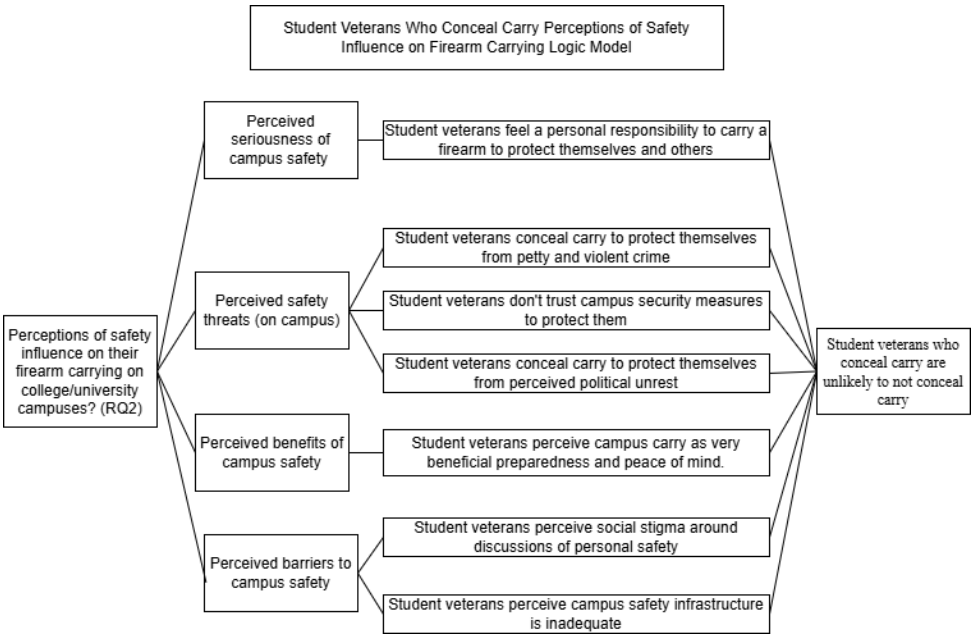


Figure 3

Carrying Student Veterans are Unlikely to Not Conceal Carry Logic Model

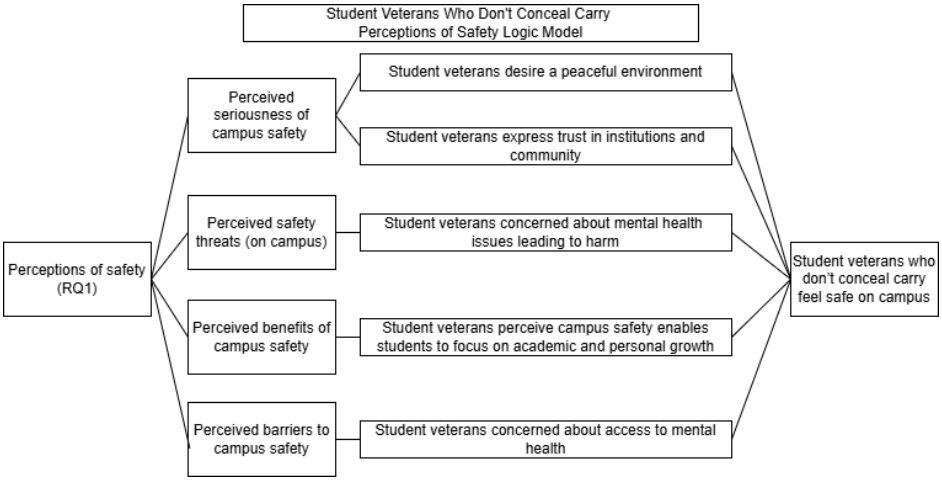
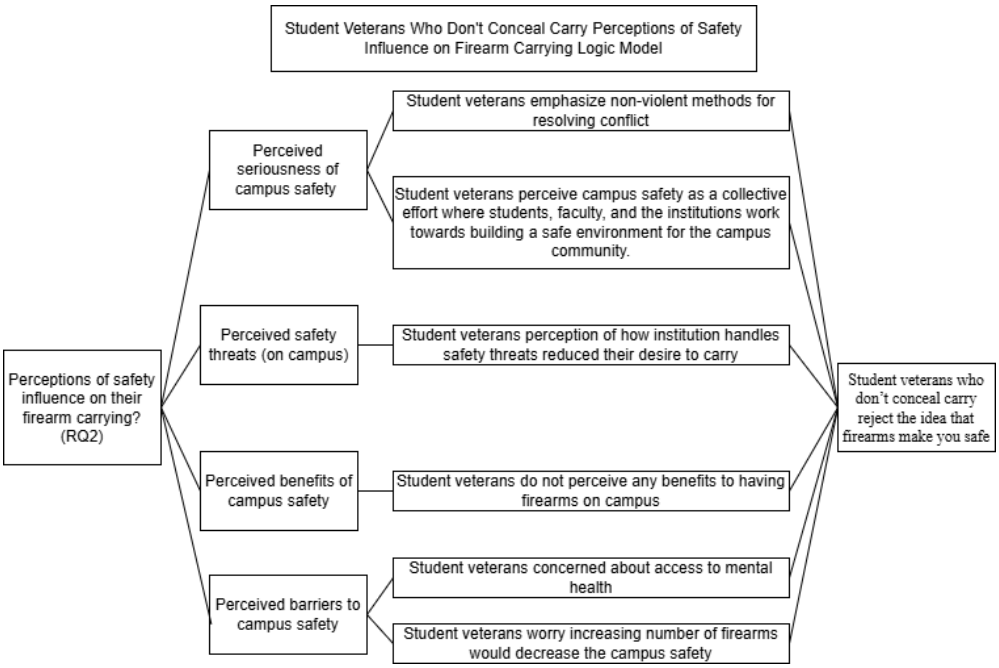


Figure 4

Noncarrying Student Veterans Reject the Idea That Firearms Make You Safe Logic Model



Evidence of Trustworthiness

There are four elements of trustworthiness are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Trustworthiness was established through a careful and systematic application of methodological techniques (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). These procedures are explained in this section.

Credibility was established through member checks, saturation, and ensuring triangulation in the data collection effort (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Before interviews began, I built rapport with participants by establishing my own background as a student veteran. This exercise increased the comfort of participants to share information with me. During interviews, the essence of answers from notes was repeated to the interviewees, allowing them to verify or add to their responses. This immediate verification ensured that participant's responses are accurately captured. A second method was to provide the participants with access to the interview transcripts for review following the interview.

This allowed participants to verify the entirety of their responses, further reinforcing the credibility of the data.

Transferability was established by obtaining detailed and contextualized descriptions of the setting, participants, and experiences during the data collection process (Shenton, 2004). This contextualized the phenomenon and allow the findings to be applied to similar settings. Recruiting a panel of participants with diverse experiences enhances the potential for the findings to resonate with additional contexts. This approach strengthens the study's transferability and aids in understanding the phenomena under investigation.

Dependability was addressed by presenting all participants with the same control questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Maintaining clear notes during interviews, transcription, and coding aided in dependability. This documentation can be a valuable reference for future researchers investigating the same or similar domains.

Through triangulation, member checking, and maintaining reflexivity, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability is established in this study, ensuring a rigorous and trustworthy exploration of student veterans' perceptions.

Results

In this qualitative study, I explored two research questions: What are student veterans' perceptions of safety, and how do those perceptions influence their decision to carry? The data collected revealed that these questions are deeply linked but in unexpected ways. Student veterans who feel safe on campus do not conceal carry and reject the idea that campus carry can make a university campus safer. Student veterans

who do conceal carry are deeply concerned about campus safety and are unlikely to not conceal carry due to a personal feeling of responsibility for their community's safety along with their military background, awareness of potential threats, the so called "fragility of safety", along with a desire to be prepared for even an unlikely emergency.

The data is broken down in two ways. The four themes are separated by research questions with subthemes broken out to ensure each area is addressed. This allows for a comprehensive overview of each perspective because the themes are split across the two subgroups of the student veterans who conceal carry and the ones who do not.

Participants P1, P2, P6, P7, P9, P11 regularly conceal carry on campus, while participants P3, P4, P5, P8, P10, P12 do not. There is a noted difference in their perspectives, and this is illustrated in the data.

RQ 1: What are the Perceptions of Student Veterans of Campus Safety (Perceived Seriousness, Threats, Benefits, and Barriers)?

Theme 1: Student Veterans Who Conceal Carry are Concerned About Campus Safety

Student veterans who conceal carry on campus express significant concerns about campus safety based on their military backgrounds and perceived institutional shortcomings. Even though they believe the university takes safety seriously, they are unwilling to rely solely on campus security infrastructure. They are particularly concerned with campus police response times which negatively impacted their perceptions. They do appreciate the roll of the institutional safety efforts in fostering a culture of security and inclusivity.

Perceived Seriousness. Student veterans who conceal carry on campus believe campus safety is a very serious issue. The responses this subgroup reveals a general uneasiness with relying on others for their safety. This uneasiness is assuaged by carrying a firearm to regain a sense of control and self-assurance.

Most participants offer faint praise for their institutions and believe that while their individual institutions take campus safety seriously, the efforts do not rise to the level that would make them feel completely comfortable with P1 saying "Even a well-run university can find itself on the wrong side of a bad day".

One participant noted a specific incident that shook their confidence in campus safety, P11 relays the incident "my friend's ex kept showing up during her labs, and she felt like the school's response wasn't nearly fast or strong enough to protect her. That rattled me pretty good."

Table 3

PS1 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS1 Interview Excerpts
P1	I take my own safety seriously and I think the university does a decent job of maintaining a secure environment… Still, I've got this built-in sense of caution. So, while I believe [University Name] does what it can, I remain aware that no setting is immune. Even a well-run university can find itself on the wrong side of a bad day. That understanding, more than anything else, keeps me on my toes.
P2	I think it's a big issue, especially for students who spend a lot of long hours on campus late at night. There are definitely stuff like campus police and the call stations but I've heard about people being harassed, having their cars broken into, and even assaults on campus. Personally, I've had issues with people off campus and that's made me hyper aware that safety can't always be guaranteed. I am always on super high alert in isolated areas like parking garages or quiet hallways at night. It's something that I think about a lot you know? I'm just always aware of what could happen which is why I always carry because you just never know what's going to happen.
P6	Yeah, I think safety is a serious issue, but it's not something most students actively worry about until something happens. People are just like that. We're pretty rural and I kind of picked [University Name] for that reason. There have been a few things since I started that will made me realize it's not immune to the issues you see everywhere else, like people stealing your laptops, fist fights at parties, and even reports of female students getting followed around by weirdos.
P7	It is an issue, but it's not something students really talk about or concern themselves with like they should. [University Name] does okay with security stuff but the reality is bad things can and will still happen. I've heard about incidents, some thefts, assaults, and a couple of scares near campus. It's especially concerning late at night when the campus feels quiet and isolated.
P9	I don't think people take it seriously enough. [University Name] has a huge, very diverse campus, and even though university police are always around, they aren't everywhere, and I still feel there are places I don't feel safe. I really don't like the large lecture halls. If something happened how would everyone be able to get out quickly. Never mind a shooter type situation. What about just a fire? We did a fire drill one day and people were so slow. I've been down range a few times so I've seen how quickly things can spiral, and that makes me more aware of how unprepared many public spaces can be for emergencies.
P11	Honestly, I think they kind of suck. We've got a lot of people coming and going at [University Name], and even though there's campus security, sometimes it feels like anyone can just wander in. I remember when my friend's ex kept showing up during her labs, and she felt like the school's response wasn't nearly fast or strong enough to protect her. That rattled me pretty good.

Perceived Threats. Student veterans who conceal carry express a variety of concerns regarding perceived safety threats on campus. There is a general concern about the open nature of the campus, especially among participants at more urban institutions. In reference to this P1 said “This campus is like a small city inside of a larger city. There are so many people around.” Many note the risk of petty theft and interpersonal violence like P6 saying “The biggest threats on campus are theft, harassment, and the potential for physical altercations”.

Participants had concerns about stalking and harassment. Some participants were concerned about isolated areas and areas around campus with poor lighting. The perception of campus police response times significantly increased the severity of perceive safety threats. P11 explained both concerns succinctly by saying “My friend’s ex showed up outside waiting for her in the parking lot and it really scared all of us. It took the police so long to get there.”

Table 4

PS2 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS2 Interview Excerpts
P1	This campus is like a small city inside of a larger city. There are so many people around. I think the threats are just the usual threats that everyone has to worry about. I know an active shooter is probably the most terrifying to me. I see it happening everywhere else and I just hope it never happens here. I think more commonly it is just people getting into fights with each other over stupid stuff. I know sexual harassment and stuff like that is probably a probably for women, but I don't really see that. Just regular crime stuff is pretty common too. The campus is fairly open so I think random people can just walk into a building and walk out with someone's stuff.
P2	Harassment, theft, and people getting into fights, especially in areas where people don't walk often or where the lighting is particularly bad. There are a few parking garages that have really creepy stairwells and a couple walking paths with bad lighting. The thing that always freaks me out the most is running into some drunk guy who doesn't know what he's saying or doing and won't stop following me. I've had a few instances where some drunk guy followed me all the way to my car after a class. I'm a guy and it freaked me out. I can't imagine how some of the female students feel when that stuff happens.
P6	The biggest threats on campus are theft, harassment, and the potential for physical altercations, especially at night or in more isolated areas. There's also the concern of stuff involving people from outside the campus community who come onto school grounds, which can be unpredictable. For students who spend time out in the field for research, like I do, there's the added vulnerability of being away from the main campus and any immediate help. While violent incidents are rare, the unpredictability of human behavior and the possibility of someone bringing conflict to campus are always in the back of my mind. It's those "what if" scenarios that I prepare for.
P7	I know it sounds weird but I worry about the stuff I'm not worrying about. If that makes sense? I try to be aware of my surroundings and just know what's going on. I think there is a probably a risk of people getting jacked for their stuff because students are walking around with thousand dollar laptops and phones and stuff. I also worry about an active shooter. I know it is rare but I swear to see one on the news every other week. I know with the protests and stuff here last year that things were pretty politically tense so I'm surprised there were more little incidents.
P9	I worry about shooters. I think since the Aurora shooting, I just feel really uncomfortable in the big classrooms with all those people. It's so crowded and the exits are so limited. I don't know if it's valid because I know they are still pretty rare, but I still try to avoid classes like that or if I have to be in one, I sit by the exit.
P11	Most people probably say something stupid like active shooter or something, but I think the biggest threats come from the people we know. I don't think people know how common stalking and harassment are. My friend's ex showed up outside waiting for her in the parking lot and it really scared all of us. It took the police so

> long to get there and he wouldn't leave us alone. So yeah, I think it's just the normal stuff women have to worry about everywhere that are the threats on campus.

Perceived Benefits. Many students' veterans perceived the primary benefit of campus safety as creating a culture of security and trust. While they still prefer to carry a firearm, they appreciate the institutional efforts to enhance safety, promote inclusivity, and foster student confidence. They feel these things are important in creating a positive culture.

Some participants note that campus safety measures signal that the institution values student's safety and well-being which reinforces a sense of community and pride. P7 said "It is nice to know that the school is thinking about security and safety." and P11 said "I think knowing the administration cares about the student body probably gives some people the sense of security they need to be here."

Table 5

PS3 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS3 Interview Excerpts
P1	Maybe in some ways they feel symbolic, something that lets you know help is close at hand if things turn sideways. But I've heard of people using them in situations where they felt threatened or cornered, and that helps foster a sense of trust in the system.
P7	Benefits? Isn't that obvious? If people won't go somewhere they don't feel safe. If people felt unsafe on campus they wouldn't be there. It is nice to know that the school is thinking about security and safety. I'm able to focus on my schoolwork. I still like to carry because I just like that peace of mind.
P9	I think having a safe campus can foster a sense of pride. It's nice knowing they care enough to take the steps necessary to ensure we are safe. It's good to know that they are prioritizing our safety with their policies. I wouldn't want to be somewhere that felt like they didn't care.
P11	I think it makes college more accessible to everyone. I know some people have a hard time with how crowded and big campus is. I think knowing the administration cares about the student body probably gives some people the sense of security they need to be here. If they didn't do what they do with all the safety policies, then I think some people would be too scared to be here.

Perceived Barriers. Carrying student veterans highlighted challenges in balancing a welcoming campus with campus security. P1 explains "It's really hard to be warm and welcoming when you have everything locked down like a military installation, you know?"

Many student veterans perceive a stigma surrounding safety discussions. P9 said "For me the biggest barrier is people not wanting to talk about what the threats actually are." They also note a lack of awareness by other students about their surroundings and the institutions resources. Regarding the emergency call boxes on campus, P2 explains that another student "thought only campus police was allowed to use them."

P9 notes that some students are uncomfortable speaking with police because of

immigration status or previous negative encounters with law enforcement “They worry about immigration issues or just straight up don’t trust cops based on stuff they’ve seen in the past.”

Table 6

PS4 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS4 Interview Excerpts
P1	I think the hardest problem is that a campus is supposed to be open and welcoming. It's really hard to be warm and welcoming when you have everything locked down like a military installation, you know? You can't exactly have TSA doing screenings for every single person trying to get to class. I also think there is a little bit of a Pollyanna type attitude about anything happening here. People who have never been in the real world often don't understand how risky things can be. It's crazy to me to think it couldn't happen here. There have been so many terrible incidents in Texas.
P2	From my perspective I think the biggest barrier is just how big campus is. It's hard to properly secure something this big and open. I also think there is an issue with people knowing about what services are available. The university should do more to make sure people know about stuff like the parking lot escort service or the call boxes. I had a classmate tell me they didn't know what they were for and thought only campus police was allowed to use them.
P6	The campus is just so damn big. I think campus police do their best but if it's going to take them 20 minutes to get to an incident then that's a problem for me. I also think people are just oblivious most of the time. There was a backpack on a bench that had been there all day. I called campus police to report it and it turn out it had been there all day and I was the first person to report it.
P7	I think there's a social stigma around talking about personal safety and carrying a firearm. Some people might feel like they can't voice concerns without being judged, especially when it comes to discussions about campus carry. It's a divisive topic, and that can discourage open dialogue about realistic safety measures, which is something I think we need more of. I tell all of my female classmates they should carry but none of them really listen.
P9	For me the biggest barrier is people not wanting to talk about what the threats actually are. I know a lot of people here who act like nothing bad could ever happen here. They get extremely uncomfortable when I bring up the possibility of carrying. There's this stigma around even mentioning weapons or violence. They act like you're jinxing yourself if you say it out loud. It's just really sad how many people don't even want to take simple steps to protect themselves and if you say something about it they act like your blaming them for something bad happening to them. I don't think it's your fault if you get victimized but you should also be aware of what the risk is when your walking around campus late at night. Some people won't even report something suspicious because they don't like talking to the cops. They worry about immigration issues or just straight up don't trust cops based on stuff they've seen in the past.
P11	Honestly, I think a big one is that security can't be everywhere at once. [University Name] is pretty spread out, so even though they do patrol, there are still empty corners and hallways late at night. Another thing is that sometimes people don't report suspicious behavior. I think they just don't want to get people in trouble or something.

Theme 2: Noncarrying Student Veterans Feel Safe on Campus

Noncarrying student veterans express a sense of safety and trust in their institution's ability to manage campus safety. They are aware of risks like petty theft, interpersonal conflict, and potential gun violence but place more emphasis on systemic issues like mental health access and the high-stress environment of higher education. like They appreciate the visible presence of campus police and the institution's commitment to building the campus community.

Perceived Seriousness. Noncarry student veterans believe the institution takes campus safety seriously. They acknowledge the risk of crime but do not find campus particularly dangerous, with the biggest risk being petty theft and interpersonal conflict.

Many student veterans note a preference for community building. P1 "I am interested in the stuff I can do though. Like building community with my classmates. Being there for them and building a support network."

They express trust in campus police recourses and note the visible presence of campus police officers being particularly reassuring. Some student veterans note a deliberate desire to move away from a military approach to safety.

Some participants notes that they become more concerned about safety issues when they see gun violence in the media P8 "I will think about how well the school could handle something serious like a shooting or something, but it is more of a response to when that sort of thing is in the news."

Table 7

PS1 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS1 Interview Excerpts
P1	Yeah, I believe campus safety is an important issue, but it's not something I lose sleep over. Everywhere has its issues and every campus has its risks, and [University Name] is no exception. I just don't feel like there's anything I can do about it and I'm just not overly concerned about it since that's not really my job anymore. Someone else gets paid for that now. Stay in your lane, you know? I am interested in the stuff I can do though. Like building community with my classmates. Being there for them and building a support network. I'd rather see the school invest in more mental health resources for my fellow students and conflict resolution classes for students and teachers. I think having more guns on campus is a bad idea. I already think we have too many guns in society.
P2	Yes, but not necessarily because of anything like fighting or violence or anything. It's more about the perception of safety and how that impacts everyone's sense of security. [University Name] is a generally safe campus. I think we need to spend more time building our campus communities instead of making everyone feel like they have to worry about their own safety. We are here to learn and worrying about having a gun all the time seems like such a weird way to respond if you are really worried about your own safety. I think most of these people walking around with firearms are just LARPing [live-action role-playing]. There are so many other ways we could improve the security and safety of campus, but everyone just wants to grab a gun and call it a day.
P5	I don't really think about campus safety. I heard about someone having their bike stolen but that's not really the sort of thing that worries me because stuff like that happens everywhere and you'll never be able to stop it.
P8	It for sure is a serious thing but it's not something I'm spending a lot of time thinking about. I will think about how well the school could handle something serious like a shooting or something, but it is more of a response to when that sort of thing is in the news. We've talked about safety stuff in class like when we do active shooter drills or fire drills. It's like something I keep in mind but try not to let to bother me too much.
P10	I think the school takes it seriously. I know when I'm walking around campus, I see the campus security guys everywhere. They have those blue emergency phones. They spend a lot of time talking to us about it. I think the real thing is "do people feel safe on campus" and my belief is that they do. I know that sometimes I can be a little more jumpy than other people but even I feel like they do a decent job. I really like how open the campus feels.

Perceived Threats. Noncarrying student veterans are concerned about mental health issues leading to student harm. Participants have concerns about student mental health and stress with the possibility of interpersonal conflicts stemming from the high stress of higher education. P4 said “So many students are dealing with the most stress they’ve ever been under and that leads to anxiety or depression or whatever, and when those go unchecked, they can lead to some bad situations, whether self-inflicted or involving others.”

Some participants mentioned school shootings when asked about safety threats on campus, P8 said “the first thing that pops into my mind is an active shooter type thing.” but other participants like P5 stress that while violence is possible its rare “I think the biggest barriers are really just systemic things like students dealing with a lot of stress but having limited access to mental health resources.”

Table 8

PS2 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS2 Interview Excerpts
P3	Most of the stuff I notice is related to interpersonal conflicts, substance abuse, and mental health crises. College is a stressful time for a lot of people, and sometimes those pressures can sometimes boil over into arguments or even fist fights. Especially at parties where everyone is drinking or on something. I think one of the big things I've noticed is how widespread the drinking and drugs are. I thought the Army had a drinking problem, but these kids are out of control.
P4	For me it's less about overt violence and more about the underlying issues that can lead to unsafe situations. The mental health stuff is a huge issue, I think. So many students are dealing with the most stress they've ever been under and that leads to anxiety or depression or whatever, and when those go unchecked, they can lead to some bad situations, whether self-inflicted or involving others. I've seen how depression can spiral because I've dealt with it firsthand.
P5	It depends on the context, right? I think walking alone at night is always a bad idea not matter where you are. You could get mugged or whatever. There are the more sort of black swan type stuff that is hard to quantify like an active shooter or some kind of bomb threat type thing. I think the biggest barriers are really just systemic things like students dealing with a lot of stress but having limited access to mental health resources. I worry about guns on campus too. Even if it's not like a full blown active shooter type thing someone having a gun could escalate an incident that would have just been a verbal altercation into something much more serious.
P8	I don't know if it's because of what we are talking about but the first thing that pops into my mind is an active shooter type thing. Even if it's not like a planned attack or something. It could just be some kind of argument that escalates. I know people get pretty heated sometimes. Everyone is just so stressed out all the time. I think everyone needs to remember that we are all just here to learn. I think mental health is another big issue. I think the normal crime stuff exists too. People just stealing someone's backpack from the library or something like that. I know sexual assault is an issue at some schools but I'm not really involved in the party scene on campus so I don't know that's really an issue or not.
P10	I think it's the usual stuff you find on a college campus. People stealing from each other or someone getting drunk at a party and wanting to fight someone. I do know a lot of people are struggling with being away from home and the stress of school. So I guess I just worry about people making bad decisions and accidentally hurting each other that way.
P12	I think there are a lot of people on campus who are really struggling and sometimes they fall into drugs or alcohol to cope. I know those people just need help but that makes me nervous. Just knowing there are that many stressed-out people around. I don't know though, there are always going to be underlying problems that need attention.

Perceived Benefits. Student veterans who don't conceal carry the feel that campus safety enables students to focus on academic and personal growth. Many participants note a general positive well-being that stems from feeling safe on campus. P10 said "I know for me personally it reduces my general feeling of anxiety.", and P4 noted the community building aspect of safety "This really helps me feel safe on campus because I feel like I'm part of the community."

Table 9

PS3 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS3 Interview Excerpts
P4	I think a lot of the community building stuff is good too. Knowing there are faculty and students working to build a supportive community gives me a sense of safety that's more about trust than just physical security. I've been to workshops and discussion groups on stuff like personal safety, bystander intervention, and mental health awareness. This really helps me feel safe on campus because I feel like I'm part of the community.
P8	It's just a fundamental part of community building right? What is it? Maslow's hierarchy of needs? Safety and security is near the bottom of the pyramid. I think people feeling safe here lets them be their best selves. That just feeds back into itself and people are less likely to wild out and get in fights or start stuff with strangers when they aren't super stressed out because they are constantly on edge from feeling unsafe.
P10	I know for me personally it reduces my general feeling of anxiety. I think people tend to interact with each other better when they aren't stressed out from feeling anxious about their personal safety. So yeah, I think just reducing the overall temperature of people's stress.
P12	Everything. I think this whole thing falls apart if people don't feel safe. It lets people feel comfortable participating in clubs and stuff like that. Imagine if it was just a free for all. No one would just meet up with a bunch of strangers in the library for the Anime club. Safety lets people build community and I think that's one of the most important parts about college. Finding yourself and finding your people.

Perceived Barriers. Noncarrying student veterans perceived the biggest barriers to campus safety are structural things like communication (interpersonal and institutional) and access to mental health. Substance abuse is particularly concerning to many participants. One participant noted that they don't feel like there are any barriers to safety.

Some participants did not perceive any barriers. P5 said, "I don't really think there are any barriers. It seems like they are doing a good job." which reinforces the notion that this subgroup is generally less concerned about safety. P12 mentioned the relative safety of their campus compared to their experience s in the military, "I'm not

getting shot at so as far as I’m concerned they’re nailing it.”

Table 10

PS4 Interview Excerpts

Participant	PS4 Interview Excerpts
P3	I think they should make them do de-escalation classes as part of orientation. I also think campus police should do more about the underage drinking. I'm not sure what we could do about the students who are of age. Maybe substance abuse classes or something.
P4	I think there are a bunch of barriers. The number of classmates who I know don't check their student email is very high and I know that's on of the main ways the school communicates with us. I also think some of the reporting stuff can be pretty daunting to an 18-year-old. I'm in my 30s and had a whole career before starting here and I would have difficulty telling you the process for reporting sexual harassment. I'm pretty sure I could find it in the handbook but still. I also think there might be an issue with accessibility for our diverse student population. International students, students of color, or LGBT students might have different safety concerns or feel less comfortable accessing resources.
P5	I don't really think there are any barriers. It seems like they are doing a good job.
P8	A big barrier is the lack of communication between students and the school. Sometimes I'll hear about something happening way after the fact and that can make me a little nervous. I like to be aware of what's going on when it's going on.
P10	Sometimes it feels like the biggest barrier is just communication. I also think some folks might not trust campus police and assume their concerns won't be taken seriously, which can make smaller issues much much worse when they don't get taken care of early on.
P12	Like I said, I feel pretty safe here on campus. I'm not getting shot at so as far as I'm concerned they're nailing it. Really though, I don't think there is anything they could do to improve things.

RQ2: How do Student Veterans' Perceptions of Campus Safety (Perceived Seriousness, Threats, Benefits, and Barriers) Influence Their Firearm Carrying on College/University Campuses?

Theme 3: Student Veterans Who Conceal Carry are Unlikely to not Conceal Carry

Student veterans who conceal carry on campus are unlikely to stop due to beliefs about personal safety, personal responsibility stemming from their military backgrounds, and a lack of trust in institutional security to respond to incidents. The lack of trust in institutional security derives from a belief that campus security is reactionary rather than preventative. They believe the benefits of carrying firearms are evident and report feeling more prepared and in control of their personal safety. They also believe carrying creates some barriers like social stigma with some displaying some internal conflict about carrying but unwilling to change their carrying behavior. While feeling judged by their peers they continue to prioritize firearm carrying. Overall, the data suggests that student veterans who conceal carry are unlikely to stop based on any policy changes by the institution.

Perceived Seriousness. Student veterans who conceal carry on campus perceived seriousness of safety plays a major role in the decision to carry for student veterans who conceal carry on campus. Many participants mention the low possibility of a violent incident but believe it's still a risk that needs to be mitigated, P1 said "…I just want to be prepared to defend myself if I need to. I know the chances of something happening are pretty low but low is not zero." While others have had personal experiences on campus and off that reenforce their desire to carry like P11 who said "It's not the only reason but

it’s a big part of it. After my friend had to deal with that crazy ex and seeing how things got out of control before the cops could show up really opened my eyes to how on our own we are.” Many participants express a sense of duty to their community to carry, P9 said “It comes down to this responsibility I can’t shake off.”

Table 11

IC1 Interview Excerpts

Participant	IC1 Interview Excerpts
P1	It does play some role in my decision to carry. I know that campus is open to anyone and I just want to be prepared to defend myself if I need to. I know the chances of something happening are pretty low but low is not zero. Having my pistol with me gives me some reassurances that if things happen, I can take care of myself and not need to rely on anyone else for my safety. It's not about being scared, it's about being ready. I just like being ready.
P2	I would carry even if I wasn't allowed to carry on campus because I carry everywhere else. I think we need to be able to protect ourselves. I'm not someone who likes to just wait for someone else to show up to take care of business. I don't want something bad to happen but I'm ready if it does.
P6	It does in a way. I know they are trying their best to make us feel safe but I just don't think it will ever be enough for me to be completely at ease in some of these classrooms.
P7	It's the main reason I carry. After what happened to my sister, I knew that I couldn't rely on anyone but me to keep me and my friends and family safe. It's not that I have lost all faith in the police, I'm just realistic and know that they aren't always going to be there when I need them. I'd much rather know that I can protect myself. Unless they posted someone in every classroom I'm not going to be able to let myself relax unless I know that I can protect myself.
P9	Not really. It comes down to this responsibility I can't shake off. Responsibility with a capital R. I just feel like because I have the training and ability, I owe it to my community to keep protecting them. It also eases the anxiety I feel when I'm in a crowded room and I know someone could walk in and start some kind of mess. It's just important for me to be prepared for the worst, you know? Hope for the best, prepare for the worst as my mom used to say. I carry even when I'm not on campus so I don't think the school could do anything for me not to carry.
P11	It's not the only reason but it's a big part of it. After my friend had to deal with that crazy ex and seeing how things got out of control before the cops could show up really opened my eyes to how on our own we are. When I was on my cutter I knew I had my whole crew to back me up. Now it's just me. I really felt it that day and ever since. I really wish I could get my friend to start carrying but she's scared of guns.

Perceived Threats. Student veterans who conceal carry on campus express a common theme: lack of trust in institutional security to keep them safe from perceived threats, P7 said “All of their security is designed to respond to something that has already happened or at best something that is in progress.” and P11 said “...and it can still take a while for someone to arrive at your location”. One participant said that campus protests influence their decision to carry. P7 said “I’ve been pretty concerned about the protests on campus.”

Table 12

IC2 Interview Excerpts

Participant	IC2 Interview Excerpts
P1	It does but not in the way I think people would assume it does. I know they are trying their best but they aren't perfect. There are gaps and I know those gaps exist. It would be hard for me to give my safety over to a system I know isn't gong to cover me 100%.
P2	Yeah, I guess so? I just don't think they'd be willing to spend the money or put people through the headache of TSA level security I would want to see in order for me not to carry. I'm glad they do what they do but really I'm not relying on them to keep myself safe.
P6	Yeah, what they do definitely impacts my thinking but they couldn't do enough to make me feel like I didn't need to have my own weapon. It's not that they don't do enough. There are just too many crazy people in the world today.
P7	Definitely. All of their security is designed to respond to something that has already happened or at best something that is in progress. The thing is, you can't be unmurdered. I know that I can protect myself so I do. It's nice that they do what they do but I don't have to worry about what they do because I'm responsible for my own protection. I've been pretty concerned about the protests on campus. I don't know if you saw any of it on the news but it was pretty bad here. Lots of people were just on the lawn screaming at people when they walked by. I think it just really shook me up when it was happening. I worry about walking alone as a woman on campus sometimes too so that definitely influences it.
P9	It sort of does. When I look at how [University Name] handles safety, I appreciate the effort they put into things like the alert systems and everything the campus police do, but I don't want to wait 15 minutes for them to show up if something is happening. I know how to handle things so I will do it myself. I just know there are a lot of people here and there is no way the school can keep us safe all the time. I know that if things go south I have to be able to protect at the very least myself. I owe that to my family. When I was in, we trained to plan for the worst possible scenario. I can't just turn that off.
P11	I think the school does a decent job overall, but the fact that no security plan is absolutely foolproof reminds me why I carry. We have patrols, we have those call boxes, and we get safety alerts, but when push comes to shove, it can still take a while for someone to arrive at your location. I've learned that you have to rely on your own readiness when things go south. So while I respect what they do, it doesn't fully erase that Responsibility I feel to protect myself and my friends, which is why I continue to carry. I really respect what they do but the risk is too high for me to not be prepared for the worst. I don't carry because I'm scared. I carry because I understand what the risks are. I've seen what can happen. I never want to be in a situation where I wished I had a way to protect myself.

Perceived Benefits. Student veterans who conceal carry perceived many benefits to conceal carrying firearms including preparedness, peace of mind, and fulfills their personal responsibility for safety. Many participants emphasized that carrying a firearm makes them feel safer and prepared for any situation like P1 who said “I am prepared for whatever situation. I keep my first aid in my bag and I’ve got my pistol on my hip. I’m ready and being ready makes me feel safe.”

They also note a feeling of responsibility and the reduction in their personal anxiety about safety on campus, P7 said “My pistol is a tool and having the right tool to protect myself and others gives me peace of mind.” and P2 said “I know that it’s a responsibility when I’m carrying.”

Table 13

IC3 Interview Excerpts

Participant	IC3 Interview Excerpts
1	Absolutely it makes me feel safer, are you kidding me? If you've ever been in a gun fight you know that the only tool you need is a gun. I've seen what happens when you don't prepare for every situation and I'm not going to get caught out like that. Having my pistol on my hip removes that little worry in the back of my brain that says "what-if?'. I know what if now. I am prepared for whatever situation. I keep my first aid in my bag and I've got my pistol on my hip. I'm ready and being ready makes me feel safe.
2	It does and it doesn't. I know that it's a responsibility when I'm carrying, and part of that responsibility means I might have to put my life in jeopardy to use the tools at my disposal. It's a last resort for if things go sideways. I feel like I'm naked when I don't have it because if something happens, I would be vulnerable. There is just something about knowing I'm ready for anything that puts my mind at ease.
7	It doesn't make me feel safer, it makes me feel ready. My pistol is a tool and having the right tool to protect myself and others gives me peace of mind. It's not just about having my gun on me though. Situational awareness stuff like keeping my head on a swivel, trusting my instincts, and knowing my way around campus all play a big part. The firearm is just one part of my overall personal protection plan.
9	For sure it does. It doesn't erase all of my worries but it does put me at ease knowing that I can defend myself if something pops off. When I'm in one of the big lecture halls, I'm still watching the doors to see who comes in and out. I always sit near a fire exit too because I know a fire is more likely than a shooter. Still though, I always come to class with two pencils and my pistol. I just like being prepared, you know? I think the Army broke my brain in that way.
11	It does. It's not that I think I'll have to draw it anytime soon, but just knowing it's there makes me feel like I've got a final backup if something were to go sideways. It's a lot like having a life jacket on a boat. You hope you never need it, but it's there if things take a bad turn. For me, carrying is that extra reassurance that makes me feel better because I've learned that being prepared will save your life.

Perceived Barriers. Student veterans who conceal carry note several barriers to campus safety including social stigma, budgetary concerns, and attitudes about law enforcement. P7 said "I think people have very liberal opinions about guns and that really negatively impacts people's willingness to carry." and P11 reenforces this point by saying "Sometimes I think the stigma of being a gun owner makes me feel like I shouldn't carry." P9 mentions concerns about attitudes around gun ownership and attitudes about law enforcement "I also don't think people would be comfortable with that because a lot of people are weird about cops and even weirder about guns."

Table 14

IC4 Interview Excerpts

Participant	IC4 Interview Excerpts
7	I think people have very liberal opinions about guns and that really negatively impacts people's willingness to carry. I think if more people were carrying it would help a lot with some of the simpler safety stuff. If you know that even ten percent of the student body is armed doesn't that seem like it would be a deterrent? I know I wouldn't want to steal someone's bike or sneak up on someone if there was a one in ten chance they were armed.
9	I don't think they could spend the money they would need to spend to make me feel safe. They would need so many officers. They would have to be stationed in every classroom and lecture hall. I also don't think people would be comfortable with that because a lot of people are weird about cops and even weirder about guns.
11	Sometimes I think the stigma of being a gun owner makes me feel like I shouldn't carry. I'll talk to the other women I know about it and they really don't like it. I just wish I could at least get them to go to the range with me so they could see it's not everything the media makes it out to be. It's just about protecting myself and my friends.

Theme 4: Noncarrying Student Veterans Reject the Idea That Firearms Make You Safe

Noncarrying student veterans reject the idea that firearms are an effective means

for promoting safety on campus. They report a strong sense in campus safety infrastructure and believe campus security and campus police are effective at protecting the campus community. Many believe carrying a firearm would exacerbate their existing mental health issues. Some believe having more firearms campus would make interpersonal relations more tense and possibly lead to violence. Overall, they believe campus safety comes from the community rather than any one individual.

Perceived Seriousness. Noncarrying student veterans' perceptions of the seriousness of campus safety influence their desire to not conceal carry on campus. They express a strong sense of confidence in campus safety and that concealed carrying is unnecessary, P5 said "There's little stuff here and there but for the most part our campus is pretty safe." Some participants report a desire to move away from firearms P8 said "I just want to work on myself and try to find some kind of peace.", P10 said "Not having a gun on me all the time has been part of my journey to being a civilian again."

Table 15

IC1 Interview Excerpt

Participant	IC1 Interview excerpt
3	Sure, it kind of does. I don't think I would carry a gun to class unless I felt unsafe in that class. I feel safe here and I'm trying to transition to a new life and get away from that military mindset. Everything isn't a threat.
4	I don't think guns make you safer. In fact, I know they make you less safe. I've seen the evidence for that. I've seen it firsthand too. I want my campus to be a safe and welcoming place to everyone. Having a big iron strapped to my hip isn't going to do that. I think it would create a barrier between me and my classmates.
5	I don't think I would change my mind about carrying on campus unless things were really bad on campus and they're just not. There's little stuff here and there but for the most part our campus is pretty safe. I'm trying to put that part of my life behind me and move on.
8	Yes and no. I personally have some mental health issues that make it unwise for me to have easy access to a gun. I've been working on it but I still think it's a bad idea. Even still I think having a weapon on my would increase my stress levels. I've carried a weapon for work a lot in the past and I know what a responsibility that is. I don't want that responsibility anymore. I just want to work on myself and try to find some kind of peace. I think having a gun around all the time would make it harder to ground myself emotionally.
10	Yeah, it really does. I used to carry on campus but after a couple weeks I just forgot my pistol at home one day. I felt so much better not having that weight on me. I think I'd been carrying around some baggage I still needed to unpack from my time in. It was part of the first step on that road for me. I went to one of the campus counselors that week and started therapy. Not having a gun on me all the time has been part of my journey to being a civilian again.
12	Carrying a gun on campus is something I've thought about a lot. Back in the Army, having that weapon was part of the job, it was mostly about protection for me but sometimes, unfortunately, about taking lives. The guys I worked with always joked that they had the only job where they got paid to break other people's stuff including their bodies. That never really sat right with me because my job was about helping people after they did that. We were kind of at odds that way, I guess. I always felt weird carrying a rifle and I think carrying a gun now would make me feel weird too. I'm studying to continue my calling as a healer and I think a gun would interfere with that.

Perceived Threats. Student veterans who don't conceal carry perception of how institution handles safety threats reduced their desire to carry. Many participants mentioned their confidence in campus police and security, P8 said "The campus police seem pretty well trained." Some participants emphasized a belief that campus safety is a shared responsibility like who P4 said "I think the school's approach reinforces my belief that safety is a shared responsibility" and P12 who said "build a community where people trust each other instead of seeing a threat around every corner". P4 rejects the premise that carrying a firearm is a reasonable response to perceived threats saying "I wouldn't carry a gun to class because I think that it is ridiculous."

Table 16

IC2 Interview Excerpts

Participant	IC2 Interview Excerpts
3	Sure. I think if things felt really unsafe on campus I might be more likely to want to take things into my own hands. I think having their own police and all the other security stuff they do makes me feel pretty okay with not having to be armed.
4	Yes, it absolutely does. I feel like the school cares about building a community. Ultimately, I think the school's approach reinforces my belief that safety is a shared responsibility, built on community and communication, not on regular people carrying guns. This perspective keeps me focused on solutions that promote long-term security rather than short-term reactions.
5	No it doesn't because I wouldn't carry a gun to class because I think that it is ridiculous. It's a school not a combat zone.
8	Sure, it does, right? They aren't perfect by any stretch but they're doing a pretty good job for a civilian organization. The campus police seem pretty well trained. I think the school is pretty open about stuff when it happens to. I like that because it lets me know they're not trying to hide anything. They want to figure out how to improve. That's always a good sign. I do feel like if they weren't doing enough I might be more inclined to carry my own weapon but I feel safe enough to let them handle that.
10	Yeah, it does. I've seen how seriously they take security. After the protests I know they can call the city cops too if things get out of hand. I feel safe on campus and that makes me feel like I can relax and not have to worry about having a gun on me all the time.
12	Yeah, the way [University Name] handles safety definitely plays a role in my decision not to carry a firearm on campus. I see how they prioritize our safety and want to build a community where people trust each other instead of seeing a threat around every corner. I'm tired from my time in the Army and I'm ready to move on. The culture here makes that possible for me. [What do you mean you are tired?] I don't know how to explain it. I'm just tired of always having violence as a solution to problems. I want to live a different life now.

Perceived Benefits. Noncarrying student veterans do not believe it is beneficial to campus safety to conceal carry on campus. Some participants emphasized their own improved mental health and social comfort, P4 said “It would not make me feel safer. It would probably make me feel more anxious.” and P12 said “I think carrying a gun around campus would probably do more to dredge up old memories that it would do to give me any sense of security or peace.”

Table 17

IC3 Interview Excerpts

Participant	IC3 Interview Excerpts
3	No, it would make me so on edge to have to carry a weapon again. I know how tense guns can make situations that don't need to be tense. I feel like to would make me constantly on edge and I would have a hard time relaxing and talking to other students. I would just be worried about making sure I didn't lose it or worse have a negligent discharge. I think it would impact how I interacted with other students too. I know most people don't really know about guns so I would be worried I was making other people nervous too.
4	It would not make me feel safer. It would probably make me feel more anxious. I know what it means to carry a tool designed for killing. I know what that weight feels like. I don't like that. I don't miss that part of the Army. I miss my friends and goofing off with them but the gun stuff was my least favorite part. I actually can't even go to a regular civilian range now because I see how they handle the weapons and it makes me so nervous to be around. I don't think I'll ever fire another weapon in my life unless I could go to a military range again. It's so much more controlled and I just trust everyone to not mess up and hurt someone. The civvie [civilian] range I went to was so chaotic.
5	I worry about carrying in general because I'd be worried I would get hurt if I had to use it. I know that there would be a chance that even if I was in the right that some people might not respond well to seeing me holding a weapon. I haven't had to deal with that much but I think in that situation it would certainly be something I would be worried about. I also just don't want to have to worry about it. I know that if something happens, I can just leave. It's not my responsibility anymore. Let the people who get paid for it deal with all that.
8	The Marine Corps taught me that a weapon is not just about being macho cool guy, it's about accountability, judgment, and an understanding of the consequences of its use. I don't take any of that lightly. A weapon is a responsibility. It's a burden you have to carry. I put that burden down when ETS'd ["Expiration Term of Service" transitioning out of the military]. I don't think it would make me feel safe or unsafe to carry. I just don't want to live that life anymore. This is a new season of life as they say.
10	I thought about it a lot when I first started school again. It would definitely give me a little dopamine hit from that feeling of control. I always think about Homer in the gun episode of the Simpson's. He's so cocksure of himself but Homer is an idiot. Guns don't make you safer. Community does. It would probably make me feel safer at first but I think that low level anxiety I'd get from carrying it and all the bad memories from deployment would eat away at me. I'm trying to put all that in the past.
12	Yeah, you know I don't think it would. There was a point in my life where my entire world was built around being ready to use my weapon to defend myself and my brothers and sisters. I think carrying a gun around campus would probably do more to dredge up old memories that it would do to give me any sense of security or peace. I did my time and I'm ready to move on.

Perceived Barriers. Student veterans who don't conceal carry highlighted several perceived barriers to campus safety that would come from increasing the number of firearms on campus. They highlight the impact firearms would have on interpersonal relations, P8 said "If everyone is walking around armed, I think that might influence how people talk to each other and interact." and P12 noted "Increasing the number of guns on campus would have a bad effect on people." Some participants note the risk of people being armed during stressful situations like P10 who said "These kids are so stressed out from school that I really think giving them access to a firearm would be extremely irresponsible." and P12 who said "When the protests were happening, people were getting in each other's faces and screaming. I know if someone got into someone's face there could have been an incident."

Table 18

IC4 Interview Excerpts

Participant	IC4 Interview Excerpts
8	I respect everyone's right to own a firearm, I do worry that adding more guns to campus could lead to some bad outcomes. If everyone is walking around armed, I think that might influence how people talk to each other and interact. I just worry about that. I don't think every situation can be solved by adding more guns to it.
10	I just worry the mental health resources on campus can't handle the influx of people there would need for me to be comfortable with a lot of these people carrying. These kids are so stressed out from school that I really think giving them access to a firearm would be extremely irresponsible. I had a lot of training and even I don't feel 100% capable of carrying a firearm everyday here. It's extremely stressful.
12	Increasing the number of guns on campus would have a bad effect on people. Everyone is so worked up as it is. I just think everyone is so on edge that introducing more guns to that equation is a really bad idea. When the protests were happening, people were getting in each other's faces and screaming. I know if someone got into someone's face there could have been an incident.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from a phenomenological study investigating student veterans' perceptions of campus safety and the influence of those perceptions on their decision to conceal carry firearms. Semi-structured interviews generated data that was analyzed to reveal significant differences in the perspectives of student veterans mediated by their propensity to conceal carry. Those who conceal carry on campus express concerns about campus safety infrastructure and a feeling of personal responsibility for protecting themselves and others from harm. This group is unlikely to change their behavior regarding campus carry. The Noncarrying student veterans expressed confidence in the institutions' safety infrastructure and rejected the idea that personally carrying firearms was useful for their safety. In the next chapter, the results are interpreted, their implications considered, and a conclusion provided.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Campus safety and carrying firearms on campus, known as campus carry, are a complex and multifaceted policy issues that are deeply intertwined with public health, mental health, violence prevention, and education policy (Ramazanova et al., 2023). Additionally, while student veterans face health risks (Bradwisch, 2022) that amplify the risks associated with firearms, there is a significant gap in research that explores their unique perspectives on safety and campus carry (Dempsey et al., 2019). This research was aimed at bridging the significant gap in the literature focusing on student veterans' unique experiences and needs in general and specifically related to campus carry.

This qualitative study was conducted to explore student veterans' experiences and decision-making processes around carrying a firearm on campus. This research sought to answer two research questions:

- What are the perceptions of student veterans of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers)?
- How do student veterans' perceptions of campus safety (perceived seriousness, threats, benefits, and barriers) influence their firearm carrying on college/university campuses?

To answer these research questions a pilot study was conducted to test the proposed research approach. The pilot evaluated whether the semistructured interview protocol and the participant recruitment strategies would effectively generate the textured qualitative data needed to answer the research questions. After modifications to the recruitment protocols due to recruitment issues, the primary study recruited 12 student veterans.

Interviews were conducted via video teleconferencing software using the interview protocol validated during the pilot. The transcripts were analyzed for themes and presented in Chapter 4.

The results provided valuable insight into the perspectives of student veterans on campus safety and firearm carrying. Each subgroup (carry/noncarrier) had significant overlaps in their responses regarding their perceptions of campus safety owing to their shared military backgrounds, but they arrived at different conclusions about how best to respond to those perceptions of safety. The decision to carry by student veterans is based on two significant factors: personal perceptions of safety (trust vs. distrust of campus infrastructure) and their desired personal identity (evolution vs. stasis). The rest of the chapter presents a more detailed discussion, conclusions, and recommendations of this qualitative study exploring student veterans' perceptions of campus safety and their decisions to carry firearms on college campuses.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this research expanded and aligned with those of existing research. This also provides valuable avenues for future research. A novel phenomenon centered around student veteran identity formation is discussed and its role in decision-making around carrying firearms is a key insight that broadens the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Divergent perspectives on safety among student veterans are examined and interpreted.

Identity Evolution Versus Identity Stability

The qualitative data gathered through this research endeavor revealed a novel

phenomenon related to student veteran identity formation and its role in decision-making regarding carrying firearms. Student veterans exhibit two broad approaches to identity renegotiation: evolution and stability. This phenomenon helps explain the behavior of the respective populations.

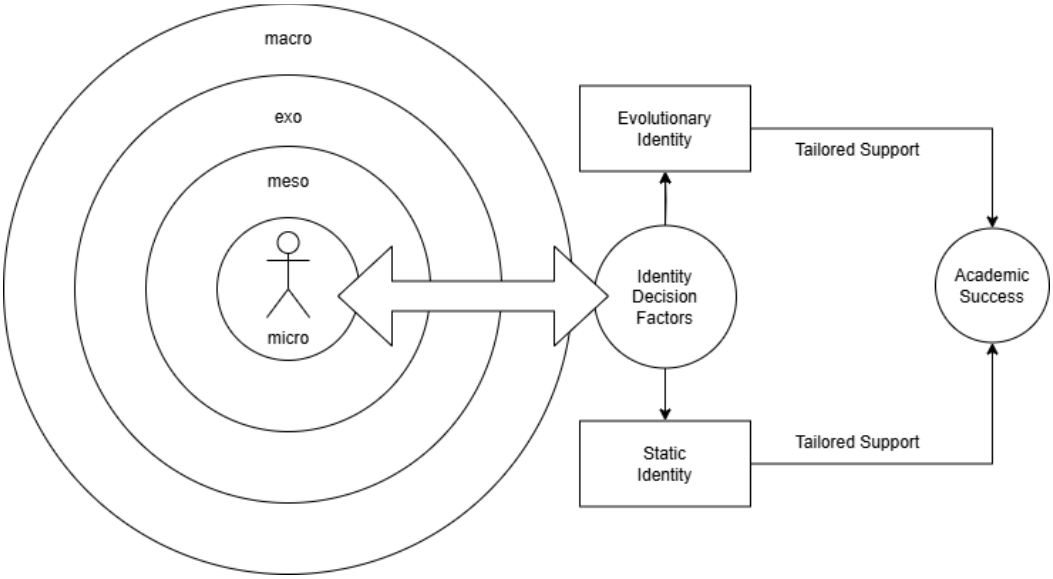
One major failure in veteran support services has been the treatment of veterans as a monolith without individualized support needs (Meffert et al., 2019). Veterans have diverse military experiences and diverse perspectives on their experiences (Hitch et al., 2023). As viewed through the socioecological lens, veterans' perspectives are mediated by internal and external factors at various levels (Cioffi-Revilla, 2016; Johnson et al., 2021). At the individual (micro) level are personal feelings about military experiences, personal mental and physical health needs, and the veteran's traits and behaviors. At the interpersonal (meso) level, family history and social networks play a role in their perspective. The institutional (exo) layer encompasses domains like the school, workplace, and neighborhood where the veteran lives and works. The societal (macro) level is the broadest spectrum, and this layer encapsulates societal influences such as religion, cultural background, and local, state, and federal policy.

This extends to student veterans, who exhibit individualized and unique perspectives on campus safety and a willingness to conceal carry firearms. Noncarrying student veterans exhibited an evolving approach to identity renegotiation while carrying student veterans exhibited a static approach. These differences explain some of the differences in safety perspectives, risk negotiation, and, thus, firearm-carrying behavior. This identity formation can be viewed through the lens of the socioecological model

where the student veteran is influenced by various external factors while also being an active agent within the process of identity formation (see Figure 1).

Figure 5

Student Veterans Identity Formation in the Context of the Socioecological Model



Note. Adapted from *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, by Bronfenbrenner, 1996, Harvard University Press.

Carrying student veterans exhibited more reliance on their established identity as veterans by engaging in behaviors engrained in them by the military. Many participants noted a sense of readiness and personal responsibility to protect the people around them which they attributed to traits instilled in them by the military. They framed their behavior in terms of duty, protection, and vigilance. Firearm carrying was not viewed as a personal preference but as an extension of deeply ingrained values.

In contrast, noncarrying students consistently noted a desire to move on from a "military mindset" and to transition away from the military and towards a civilian career

path, suggesting a desire to evolve a new identity separate from their veteran identity. Their language often focused on forging new identities as students first and eschewing the constant vigilance instilled in them by the military.

This identity formation classification is potentially useful for providing adequate support to each identity subgroup by more accurately identifying the appropriate support modalities needed by that student veteran. Each identity subgroup exhibited potentially maladaptive behavior related to their chosen identity formation. Carrying students discuss behaviors that suggest hypervigilance (Rollman, 2009), while noncarrying students may avoid military-related concepts to disengage from their military identity, which could negatively impact their ability to seek support services aligned with their veteran status (Houle et al., 2022).

To avoid simply building two monoliths, a spectral approach should be utilized. A model similar to the five-factor model (FFM), which is comprised of five broad traits comprised of a spectrum of two characteristics, student veteran identity should be interpreted as a spectrum with “change” being the x-axis. It is unknown at this time what a useful y-axis would be. However, ultimately, these findings suggest supporting student veterans requires more than generic one-size-fits-all support programs. Tailored, context-dependent interventions that meet individual needs are needed to ensure every student veteran is able to achieve success in higher education.

Divergent Perceptions of Safety

The data revealed significant differences in student veterans’ conceptualizations of safety. Firearm-carrying student veterans tended to focus on the “fragility of safety”

and worst-case scenarios such as active shooters and interpersonal violence, which points towards how this population conceptualizes risk and explains their propensity for firearm-carrying. This view is supported by Monteith et al. (2023), who suggested the phenomenon may be an effect of exposure to the high stress of the military and combat environments.

Noncarrying student veterans tend to take a more systemic view of safety with a focus on mental health. They generally view the existing campus safety infrastructure as adequate but the mental health support infrastructure as inadequate. This call for increased mental health support is aligned with earlier work by Blaauw-Hara (2016) where student veterans expressed a strong interest in veteran-specific academic support and mental health resources.

Carrying Student Veterans Obstinate in Carrying Behavior

Firearm-carrying student veterans consistently stated that no institutional safety policy would change their minds or prevent them from carrying a firearm. Many stated they would carry firearms even if they were illegal. This aligns with existing research, which suggests that people who own firearms and regularly carry them engage in motivated reasoning to justify their behavior (Pierre, 2019). This strongly suggests that university policy alone is unlikely to modify firearm-carrying behavior. This finding aligns with other work that suggests firearm-carrying behavior is socially mediated and difficult to curtail through policy (Boine et al., 2020; Weybright et al., 2024).

Noncarrying Student Veterans Reject the Idea that Firearms Make You Safer

Noncarrying student veterans report feeling safe on campus and trusting in

institutional safety infrastructure such as campus police and security. They rejected the idea that carrying a firearm makes them feel safer and instead preferred community-based approaches to campus safety, such as community building and mental health support. They also report feeling less safe knowing other students may have firearms. This aligns with literature investigating the perspectives of the broader population (Crifasi et al., 2022) with the majority of people expressing concerns about increased firearms in government buildings or political rallies.

They also expressed a desire to move away from a "military mindset." Many student veterans are enrolled in higher education to aid in their transition to civilian life. This aligns with the existing literature with "transitioning from the military" being a common motivation for student veterans (Gregg et al., 2016). Some student veterans praised veteran-specific resources and affinity groups for aiding the transition, which is also supported by existing research (Brohawn et al., 2023).

Community building is a common refrain among noncarrying student veterans for improving safety and reducing interpersonal conflicts. This aligns with work by Blackburn et al. (2023), which suggests that having a community-led violence prevention program is effective. Many worried that carrying firearms might escalate interpersonal conflicts between students. This feeling is supported by existing evidence (Phillips & Maume, 2007) on the weapon instrumentality hypothesis, which suggests that the presence of firearms increases the violent escalation of conflicts. They also noted that carrying a firearm or knowing that others were carrying would make them feel less safe. This aligns with earlier work in this area. Concerns about firearm violence are associated

with feeling less safe on campus and increased suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Mournet et al., 2024). This is particularly concerning for student veterans as this population is already at an increased risk for suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Rudd et al., 2011; Theis et al., 2021).

Limitations of the Study

This research was limited by the non-random sample of 12 participants, which significantly limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample also skewed male (66%) which more closely matches the active military gender dynamic (Heinecken, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) compared to the undergraduate population but is not representative of either population. No race and ethnicity data were collected, which limits the analysis of how cultural issues may intersect with perspectives of safety and firearm-carrying behaviors. The sensitive nature of the topics being discussed could have limited disclosure or impacted potential participants' willingness to volunteer. Therefore, the results should not be generalized to the general student veteran or non-military student population.

Recommendations

There are multiple recommendations for practice and further research that are presented in this research. These recommendations focus on providing further insights into the perspectives of students and student veterans, especially regarding their perceptions of safety, identity, and well-being.

Identity Evolution Versus Identity Stability Research

A novel phenomenon found in the present research is the identity evolution versus

identity stability framework. It was used to understand the perspectives of student veterans and their approach to campus safety and firearm-carrying behavior. This framework should be explored in future research to better understand its utility and potential applicability for supporting student veterans.

The identity framework was identified through interviews with individual student veterans. The interview process and subsequent transcript evaluation were time-consuming. An instrument to classify student veterans using the identity framework that could be self-administered via a website where relevant services would be recommended based on the participants' scoring. Future research should focus on developing and validating that instrument.

Exploring the Perspectives of Nonveteran Students Who Conceal Carry Population

This study set out to explore the safety perceptions of student veterans who conceal carry on campus. With the insights gained, comparisons could be made with the general student population. Asking questions like "What are the safety perceptions of the non-veteran student who conceal carries?" and "How do their perceptions compare to the student veteran population?" would broaden the knowledge base of this scantly explored topic.

While research has often explored student and faculty perceptions of these policies, it very rarely focuses on the actual people engaging in the behavior (Hassett et al., 2020) or if it does, it is often limited to ownership rather than specific behaviors such as concealed carry on campus. Many of the same knowledge gaps identified for student veterans remain for the broader student population.

Online Student Veterans

Some informal data collected during the recruitment process suggests that firearm-carrying student veterans are more likely to enroll in distance education classes. Several student veterans who were enrolled only in online classes volunteered to participate but were rejected because they did not meet the inclusion criteria of carrying a firearm on campus. There is some existing evidence in the literature that student veterans are more likely to attend classes remotely (Radford et al., 2016). This phenomenon may explain the initial recruitment issues in this research process. This gap in the perspectives of the online student veterans should be explored in future research.

Implications

The goal of this research was to add student veterans perspectives to the discussions around campus safety and campus carry. The findings highlight various approaches to navigating and managing the personal safety of student veterans. This section outlines the potential positive social changes that could arise from this research.

Positive Social Change

The positive social change that comes from providing improved academic and mental health resources for student veterans by increasing the knowledge base around their perceptions of safety and firearm-carrying behaviors is huge. There are both direct benefits as well as more systemic effects.

Many veterans face significant barriers to success in higher education which stem from their military service (Nichter et al., 2019). Incorporating the perspectives of student veterans into policy decisions enables universities and colleges to better serve this

vulnerable population and allow them to successfully forge a new path. Matching tailored support for student veterans based on the identity framework enables better matching and more holistic support systems to be built for this population. Improving individual outcomes inevitably improves the family system by reducing individual stress factors.

This study highlighted the concerns that many student veterans have about the perceived gaps in campus safety. Universities should consider creating student-led safety advisory panels. Giving student veterans a role in campus safety could improve student veteran outcomes by improving their trust in campus safety infrastructure, leading to campus safety outcomes. Additionally, incorporating student veteran volunteers into training programs like the "Green Dot" could similarly improve outcomes all around (Coker et al., 2011). Student led approaches to violence prevention have been effective at the primary school level (Pack et al., 2011). Similar models can also be applied to higher education.

Theory and Method

Socioecological Model

The socioecological model was useful for understanding the complex systems around student veterans that influence their behaviors and identities. Analyzing student veterans' perspectives on safety and campus environments through SEM helped to identify connections between the distinct SEM levels influencing student veterans' perceptions of safety. Once these links were drawn, it became clear that there were two distinct categories of student veterans that revealed the identity formation phenomenon.

Social Media Recruitment Strategies

I used social media to supplement recruitment efforts. There were some recruitment issues early on, particularly during the pilot study, so all avenues were pursued. During the pilot study, three interviews were canceled when there were concerns about the participants not being honest about their background, which led the interviewer to question if the participants met the eligibility criteria. Twelve interviews were scheduled but the participants did not arrive at the scheduled time. Taken together, the canceled meetings equate to about 20 hours of lost time.

I recommend that individual researchers not utilize social media for qualitative research. The number of contacts generated was high but the hit rate for successful interviews was low. Over 400 inquiries were generated from social media, with only one study participant being recruited from social media for this research. However, the time and resources utilized cannot be justified. Focusing on affinity groups, professional contacts, and other methods for generating contacts were much more fruitful. In a larger team setting, this tool may offer some utility. However, a research team should be prepared to navigate a high volume of inquiries, many of which may not be relevant.

Veteran Recruitment Strategies

The population of interest in this research was student veterans. While veterans are an important population for research, they can be a difficult population for researchers (Barker et al., 2022). This is due to numerous factors such as general reluctance to participate in research because of a general mistrust of researchers, historical factors such as service members being experimented on without explicit consent, SES factors,

physical and mental health, and a plethora of other factors.

Once researchers have gained access to veterans another issue is navigating veteran subculture. The subculture of the military and veterans is as nuanced and diverse as any other subculture researchers might encounter (Meyer & Wynn, 2018). This subculture displays a distinct value system, specialized language, and behavioral patterns.

Recruiting veterans requires working with affinity groups such as the Student Veterans Association, Disabled American Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. Therefore, researchers should focus on building trust in affinity group. Allowing extra time in interviews for rapport building is important for establishing trust and enabling more open communication among the participants. Clearly communicating the goals of the research and the benefits for the veteran population significantly boosts community trust and engagement (Flynn et al., 2019). Researchers should always target their outreach efforts for recruitment, but in the case of veterans this is even more important. Simplifying the volunteer process for veterans is important as they are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health barriers. In general, special care should be taken to address mental and physical health concerns. Recruiting veterans requires humility and patience as part of the research. Prioritizing strategies that rely on building rapport with the veteran population, building accessibility into your methodology, and ensuring veterans understand research goals enabled researchers to engage this hard-to-study population more effectively.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored student veterans' perspectives regarding campus

safety and how those perspectives influence their desire to carry a firearm on campus. Student veterans, campus safety, and campus carry are complex and multifaceted policy issues that are deeply intertwined with public health, mental health, violence prevention, and education policies (Ramazanova et al., 2023). The present research revealed a novel phenomenon around student veteran identity as they transition from their military identity into their civilian and student identity. These two identity paths, "identity stability" and "identity evolution," help explain why some student veterans see firearm carrying as essential whereas others reject it.

The key implication of this research was that institutional support services targeted at student veterans should be tailored to the individual needs of the student veteran. Focusing on the individual needs of student veterans and the complexities they navigate around their identity as they transition from the military could improve academic and health outcomes by reducing internal and external stressors. Such insight fosters positive social change by supporting veterans' academic success and by cultivating safer, more inclusive environments for all students.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Interview Study Seeks Student Veterans to Discuss Their Perceptions of Campus Safety

This is an invitation to a study that asks about the experiences of student veterans on campus and their perceptions of campus safety especially regarding firearms on campus. Student veterans will be asked to describe their experiences of campus safety, especially regarding campus carry policies.

About the study:

- 60-minute in-person/virtual interview that will be audio recorded for transcription (the recording will remain confidential)
- You will receive a $20 gift as a thank-you for your time.
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share your name or any details that could be used to identify you.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Veteran
- Enrolled at a college or university in Texas

To confidentially volunteer or for more information, contact the researcher:

redacted

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Kerwin Flaherty, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introduction (This portion is read verbatim at the beginning of every interview):

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I will ask a couple of questions, but I would like to let you guide this discussion somewhat today.

I want to record our conversation today to be attentive to the interview and transcribe our discussion later. I will be the only one with access to the recordings, which will be deleted after I complete my transcription.

I will forward the transcription for review and then delete the video. I may also ask you some follow-up questions or ask you to schedule another interview to clarify something you said. All information will be kept confidential; your participation is voluntary, and you can stop the interview or retract your consent to participate in the research today or at any time. Please review the packet of mental health services I sent you before our discussion today.

Do you understand all of that? (annotate verbal consent)

Do you have any questions before we begin?

If the participant does not give verbal consent for recording and participation, thank them for their time and end the call.

Demographic Questions:

- D1. What is your age and gender?
- D2. What is your major and year in school?
- D3. How long did you serve in the military?
- D4. What did you do in the military?
- D5. Do you have any deployments (combat or otherwise)?
- D6. How often do you carry a firearm on campus?

Perceptions of Safety:

- PS1. How serious do you believe the issue of campus safety is at your institution?
- PS2. What threats to safety do you perceive exist on campus?
- PS3. Are there aspects of campus safety that you find particularly reassuring or effective?
- PS4. What barriers, if any, do you perceive that prevent effective campus safety?

Intention to carry:

- IC1. How do your feelings around campus safety influence your decision to carry or not carry a firearm on campus?
- IC2. Does the way your institution approaches safety impact your desire to carry on campus?
    a. How does your perception of threats influence your decision to carry?

IC3. Does/would carrying a firearm on campus make you feel safer?
   a. How do your perceptions of the benefits of campus safety influence your decision to carry?

IC4. Does the knowledge that other people might carry firearms on campus make you feel safer?

IC5. Have you had any negative experiences due to a firearm on campus?

Closeout:

C1. Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences as a student veteran?