

Concealed Carry on Campus as an Expression of Racialized Vulnerability

Todd C. Couch¹

¹ Francis Marion University, Florence, SC todd.couch@fmarion.edu

Received May 20, 2020

Accepted for publication October 12, 2020

Published October 20, 2020

Abstract

Over the last twenty years, colleges and universities in the United States have begun to place campus safety as one of its highest priorities. Displeased with current best practices in campus security, a minority of students advocate for allowing concealed firearms on campus. Substantive research on why this population desires to arm themselves is scarce. Addressing this gap in the literature, this study examines 30 interviews with chapter presidents of a national student gun rights organization. Engaging in what is referred to as “racialized vulnerability,” participants highly associate racial differences with feelings of vulnerability and the need to carry a firearm. Men of color are viewed with great suspicion, while immigrants are perceived as a hostile invading force. Extending Feagin’s theory of systemic racism to gun politics, this paper argues anti-other, and nativist ideologies underly the organized advocacy for concealed carry on campus and are responsible, at least in part, for the homogenous membership of this movement.

Keywords: Firearms; Racism; Vulnerability; Racial Framing; Systemic Racism

Publication Type: Original research article

Preferred Citation: Couch, Todd C., 2020. “Concealed Carry on Campus as an Expression of Racialized Vulnerability.” *Sociation*, 19(2), 49-58.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/)

Introduction

Violence has long been an aspect of the American experience. From the genocide of the indigenous population to modern deaths resulting from law enforcement officers’ excessive force, it is difficult to separate American history from these acts of violence (Feagin 2018). Acts of aggression are frequently observed in U.S. films, music, and popular pastimes such as football and mixed martial arts. Yet, despite its foundational role in American culture, Americans often recoil in horror when violence spills out of its socially acceptable parameters (Newman et al. 2008). This is observed in no better place than the phenomenon of school shootings.

Over the last two decades, mass violence at U.S. primary schools, colleges, and universities has become an all too common aspect of American life. The once hallowed halls of educational institutions now find themselves viewed as places subject to potentially life-threatening encounters. In response to this new

reality, institutional safety has become paramount for prospective students and their parents. Self-locking doors, encrypted key cards, emergency shelters, and armed campus security guards have become best practices in ensuring campus safety. Though their ability to prevent large-scale violence is difficult to assess, these procedures have successfully prevented everyday criminal acts such as theft, burglary, and vandalism (Rasmussen and Johnson 2008). Despite best practices adequately addressing most families’ safety concerns, self-help tactics, namely carrying concealed firearms, have been proposed by college and university students’ discontent with campus safety efforts. The most noteworthy and best-organized student self-help entity, and subject of this study, is Prepared Students.

Founded in response to a string of campus shootings, Prepared Students advocates for the right of students, faculty, and staff with concealed handgun licenses to carry their firearm on campus. Claiming law enforcement officers cannot be dispatched in a

timely enough manner to resolve life-threatening situations, Prepared Students claims only those at the scene of a violent incident have the power to save themselves. Thus, concealed carry is presented as a means of empowering campus stakeholders and reducing victimization.

Gaining notoriety following a successful lawsuit against Springs College, Prepared Students has used expert legal and political skills to advance concealed carry on campuses in 12 states. At the time of this study, concealed carry was allowed on college and university campuses in Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Oregon, Texas, Tennessee, Utah, and Wisconsin. Worth noting is a lack of uniformity across campus firearm policies and gun owners' exact permissions. Their most successful tactics include extensive state-level lobbying, prolonged legal battles with campus administration, and offering information tables aimed at students, faculty, and staff interested in concealed carry. Additionally, Prepared Students frequently engages in on-campus "empty holster" protests organized through Facebook, their primary means of disseminating information. Due to their strategic outreach and activism, Prepared Students now boasts 36,000 members spread across 300 individual chapters at U.S. colleges and universities. The transient nature of college students makes the accuracy of this claim is difficult to assess.

Though its social and political impact has been significant, Prepared Students has largely escaped sociological analysis. Given most college and university stakeholders are adamantly opposed to concealed firearms on their campus (Cavanaugh et al. 2012; Soboroff et al. 2019; Thompson et al. 2013), Prepared Students warrants analysis as a subculture with its own norms, values, and beliefs. The social and cultural understandings guiding the organization deserve a sociological examination, at least in part, to understand the influence of these belief systems in shaping its membership. Despite offering official statements implying community stakeholders are equally encouraged to join Prepared Students, its individual chapters remain overwhelmingly comprised of White males.

This study seeks to extend the sociological understanding of Prepared Students by examining how its members explain their vulnerability to violence and how this construction of vulnerability reflects a broader framing of the social world. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the core vulnerability narratives guiding Prepared Students and understand these beliefs' influence in shaping its individual chapter demographics.

Literature Review

Sociological research on student gun rights advocates, specifically Prepared Students, is scarce. Couch (2017) provides initial insight into Prepared Students by analyzing the self-defense narratives shaping its leadership. Often framing a need for self-defense in a racially-framed manner, it was observed that Prepared Students' leaders frequently utilize nativist and colorblind rhetoric to identify Black and Latino men as the primary motivators to arm oneself. Couch (2020) also noted that Prepared Students' leaders frequently express a sense of having control of their lives taken away by communities of color, women, and the LGBTQ community. These findings are significant because they offer an initial analysis of Prepared Students and sociological examination of student gun ownership. Yet, they strongly suggest Prepared Students warrants further investigation. This paper strengthens the sociological research on Prepared Students by developing the concept of racialized vulnerability to understand the specific way racially framed vulnerability narratives influence the organizations' membership.

Despite the scarcity of sociological research on Prepared Students, insight into the organization may be obtained by analyzing general gun ownership in the United States. Many U.S. gun owners use firearms as a form of self-help connected to a larger lack of faith in the state to offer protection from crime (Smith and Uchida 1988). This distrust in the collective security structure encourages the purchase of firearms to enhance one's personal security (Gua 2008; Young et al. 1987). Gun ownership is also higher amongst citizens embracing individualist narratives and resistant to being viewed as dependent on the state for safety (Braman and Kahan 2006; Kahan and Black 2003). Further, anxieties stemming from changing social norms have been connected to White, male, and conservative gun owners (Melzer 2012; O'Neill 2007; Stroud 2012), while neo-radical politics were framing firearms as tools for protection from police and other officials with the propensity to violate one's civil rights fuel Black gun ownership (Carlson 2012).

While the above research grants potential insight into Prepared Students, it fails to identify the nuance of Prepared Students as a student-based gun rights organization. Displaying authoritarian and dogmatic personality types, students with concealed handgun licenses are a "high risk" population frequently engaging in chronic risky behavior, in trouble with the police, and displaying a pattern of binge drinking and illegal drug use (Cavanaugh et al. 2012; Douglas et al. 1997; Miller et al. 2002). These findings are essential because they highlight some of the specific ways in which college-age students possessing concealed handgun license experience their world. This paper

extends the current research on student gun ownership by analyzing the unique patterns Prepared Students, as a student-based gun rights organization, constructs notions of vulnerability grounded at least in part by a racialized understanding of the world.

An analysis of the influence of racial understandings on vulnerability construction is vital for increasing sociological knowledge on student gun rights organizations. As post-racialism has become embedded in popular culture, vulnerability narratives have become increasingly utilized as tools for reproducing structural inequality (Carlson 2013; Killias 1990). Despite traditional forms of vulnerability being rooted in a structural understanding of a group's likelihood of experiencing conditions outside of its control (Cutter et al. 2003), dominant group members separate vulnerability from a structure to maintain social power through regressive movements (Donovan 2006; Dragiewicz 2008). Thus, an examination of how Prepared Students, as an almost exclusively white male organization, articulates states of vulnerability informed by racial difference is needed because it provides insight into how dominant groups construct states of vulnerability in attempts to reproduce inequality.

Theoretical Framework

Racism has been defined as "a fundamental characteristic of social projects which create or reproduce structures of domination based on essentialist categories" (Omi and Winant 1994: 162). However, racism is more than a mere characteristic of social projects; in its most basic form, it is a white supremacist mechanism for colonization, exploitation, and overall subordination based on race (Feagin 2013; Ture and Hamilton 1992; William-Myers 1994). As Feagin (2006: 21) notes, white racism is not just "...racial prejudice and individual bigotry...[but] a material, social, and ideological reality that is well embedded in all major U.S. institutions." Thus, all racial relationships must be contextualized within a systemic understanding of racial domination (Feagin 2018).

Feagin's (2006) Systemic Racism Theory argues racism is foundational to American society and "encompasses a broad range of racialized dimensions ... developed over centuries by whites" (Feagin 2006: xii). Since the first contact with people of color, Whites have socially, economically, and physically exploited and constructed people of color from within a cognitive framework of racial oppression known as the "white racial frame" (Feagin 2018). This centuries-old worldview rationalizes racial oppression through racial stereotypes, narratives, and their interpretations, images, language, and emotions (Feagin 2013). These

elements may be observed in both "hard"/explicit and "soft"/implicit variations (Wingfield and Feagin 2013).

The implications of using Feagin's theory, specifically the white racial frame, in the study are that it illuminates the foundational role of racialized emotions, namely suspicion and anger, in developing the vulnerability offered by leaders in Prepared Students. The white racial frame provides a tool for grasping the specific way Prepared Students defines themselves as vulnerable subjects despite mostly experiencing structural privilege. In the analysis that follows, Feagin's theory provides significant insight into how Prepared Students constructs vulnerability narratives informed by racial difference. Specifically, Feagin's work aids in understanding what these storylines reveal about how Prepared Students as an organization make sense of its world and how these understandings influence the composition of its membership.

Data and Methods

Participants for this study were recruited via messages on individual chapter Facebook pages, handing out fliers at chapter meetings, leaving fliers with local firearms dealers, mass recruitment emails to national organization leaders, and snowball sampling (Noy 2008). A total of 17 different chapter meetings were attended, and approximately 130 emails were sent. These procedures yielded 53 students requesting more information on the project. Individuals expressing interest in the study were given a detailed description of the project and what their part in the study would be. After additional information was provided, 34 students agreed to proceed as participants. When data collection began, only 30 of the Prepared Students' members could be reached due to scheduling conflicts. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 30, with a mean age of 22.96% of respondents racially identified as white, and 93% were identified as males. The members of Prepared Students involved in this study represent chapters from all regions of the United States. However, almost half (47%) reflect the Southwest. The most common academic major observed among participants was Criminal Justice (37%). Detailed demographic information of the students involved in this study is provided in Table 1 (pg. 23).

Based on previous research on firearm ownership in the United States (Carlson 2013; Melzer 2012), it was suspected that a possible race effect could influence members' willingness to participate or divulge meaningful information to the researcher. For this reason, all images of the researcher were removed from online spaces throughout the entirety of data collection.

Semi-structured, qualitative interviews (interview schedule provided upon request) were used as the primary means of data collection. Strategic probing following open-ended questions allowed for exploring how respondents' lived experiences affected their perception of reality and understanding of vulnerability. Semi-structured interviews provided the ability to see past the superficial to grasp the structural, and often racialized, underpinnings of the core beliefs motivating Prepared Students' leadership.

Individual interviews were conducted at times and via mediums agreeable to the individual participant. Mediums for interviews included face-to-face, telephone, and Skype (audio only). Approximately 47% (14) of the interviews were conducted in person, 43% (13) by telephone, and 10% (3) by Skype. Face to face interviews presented a unique challenge in that participants could ascribe a racial identity to the researcher based on appearance. Informed by Carlson's (2013) research, appeals to traditional masculinity performances, specifically an infatuation with college football, were employed to develop a rapport with participants and minimize a possible race effect's influence on the interview process.

Each interview opened with a brief discussion of the participant's involvement with Prepared Students'. This portion of the interview asked respondents questions surrounding how they came to be involved with the organization and why they viewed their participation as necessary. Members were then asked to outline the foreseeable advantages and consequences of permitting concealed carry on campus. Portion one of each interview concluded with a brief vignette focusing on the desire to become involved in Prepared Students.

The second phase of the interview focused on the student's carrying practices. This portion of the interview process was interested in investigating the participant's personal history with firearms and their role in the individual's daily life. This section of the interview concluded with a vignette addressing the desire to obtain a concealed handgun license.

Lastly, the interview concluded with questions about chapter demographics and recruiting strategies. This portion of the interview was centered on problems concerned with how individual members describe their respective chapters of Prepared Students' demographics. Additionally, participants were asked to discuss the steps their chapter has taken to recruit new members. Upon completing the interview, participants were asked to fill out a brief demographic form.

The researcher transcribed all interviews. This decision was made to allow for revisiting conversations and extracting information initially

missed while conducting the interview. To ensure full data extraction, all recordings were reviewed twice.

Content analysis was used to identify the structural patterns that emerged during interviews. Critical to "making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff 1980), this analytic approach highlighted narrative patterns across interviews apt for contextualizing within broader theoretical frameworks. Utilizing Grounded Theory (Burawoy et al. 1991) to identify patterns that may provide more comprehensive insight into Prepared Students, the initial analysis revealed that though Prepared Students advocates for carrying firearms on campus, the university campus itself is treated as merely one aspect of members' lives and their understanding of a need to concealed carry. As transcripts for review, it appeared that participants' desire to carry a firearm on campus reflected feelings of vulnerability off-campus. Specifically, participants routinely discussed off-campus encounters/observations while advocating for firearms on their campus. Mindful of the identified emphasis placed on members' off-campus lives, the additional analysis resulted in the observation of four trends across interviews: 1) A general self-defense narrative influenced by racial difference, 2) A feeling of losing control of one's surroundings, 3) A social construction of reality in which threat is ever-present, and 4) A specific sense of vulnerability connected to a racialized understanding of reality. After reviewing the transcripts once more, it was decided that this paper would focus on trend #4.

Systemic Racism was employed as a theoretical tool for contextualizing the observed trend of connecting racial difference to feelings of vulnerability due to its emphasis on both the deeply-entrenched racial framing of society and racism's material consequences. Guided by theory, transcripts were scrutinized once more, noting variations in how participants expressed racialized emotions and described their vulnerability to crime. Special attention was given to systemic patterns and tensions within responses, marking frequency, and the logical coherence in which interviewees expressed ideas. This procedure resulted in identifying two narratives specific to how the members of Prepared Students construct their vulnerability, and the requisite need to carry firearms.

RESULTS

Common across most of the interviews with Prepared Students' leaders was an articulation of vulnerability

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Sex	Age	Race	Region	Major	Current Member
Richard	M	23	White	S	Political Science	Yes
Brad	M	19	White	S	Criminal Justice	Yes
Dillion	M	22	White	NE	Criminal Justice	Yes
Roger	M	21	White	SW	Criminal Justice	Yes
Garrett	M	22	White	S	Criminal Justice	Yes
Ashley	F	18	White	SW	Biology	Yes
Ben	M	24	White	S	Sport Science	Yes
Bill	M	22	White	W	Biology	Yes
Brandon	M	20	White	S	Kinesiology	Yes
David	M	24	White	MW	Business	Yes
Aaron	M	23	White	S	Political Science	Yes
Ryan	M	23	White	S	Accounting	Yes
Walt	M	21	White	SW	Criminal Justice	Yes
James	M	22	White	SW	Pre-Law	Yes
Jesse	M	27	White	MW	Political Science	Yes
Thad	M	23	White	MW	Criminal Justice	Yes
Matt	M	22	White	S	Criminal Justice	Yes
Tyler	M	30	White	S	Business	No
Earl	M	26	White	SW	Criminal Justice	No
Wade	M	27	White	MW	Computer Science	No
Emma	F	23	White	SW	Criminal Justice	Yes
Boston	M	22	White	S	Chemistry	Yes
Hunter	M	26	White	S	Business	Yes
Rod	M	28	White	SW	Criminal Justice	Yes
Curtis	M	24	White	S	Criminal Justice	Yes
Othan	M	22	Hispanic	SW	Sport Science	Yes
Vince	M	24	White	SW	Business	Yes
Grace	F	22	White	S	Business	Yes
Danny	M	22	White	MW	Engineering	Yes

That was highly associated with racial differences. This practice may be referred to as “racialized vulnerability” – constructing a vulnerable state vulnerability relied on racially framed feelings of suspicion. Respondents displaying this specific pattern framed men of color as suspicious and responsible for creating social contexts in which participants needed to arm themselves. The second most common narrative trend focused on stereotypes about immigrants, specifically from Mexico and Latin America. Respondents expressing this particular version of racialized vulnerability asserted immigrants have not only disrupted their daily lives, placing them into a context outside of their control, but have also organized to invade the United States. Participants displaying this pattern view arming themselves against immigrants as their patriotic duty.

The two variations of racialized vulnerability narratives identified in this study may be referred to as the “Suspicious Male” and “Disrupting Immigrant” storylines. Both narratives rely on racial differences in their construction of vulnerability and prescribe carrying a firearm at all times as the only means of regaining control of one’s social context. In the following sections, both storylines are analyzed in detail using interviews with Prepared Students’ chapter presidents. Both storylines permeated most of the interviews with Prepared Students’ members, but the specific individuals discussed in this paper are significant due to their influential role in shaping Prepared Students. As chapter presidents, they were responsible for determining individual chapter goals and communicating the national organization’s mission to their members and respective campuses.

The Suspicious Male

“When I’m walking home at night there are always these ... well just to be honest black guys outside the store by my house. I guarantee you they have pistols at the least and carrying allows me the chance to fight back when they try to rob me.” [Emphasis added]

-Roger (21-year-old Criminal Justice major)

The majority of participants (83%) in this study frequently expressed feelings of suspicion towards men of color when describing their sense of vulnerability and the subsequent need to carry a firearm. Specifically, respondents asserted firearms grant the ability to maintain control of their lives when an imminent attack from men of color occurs. As observed in Roger’s comment above, many respondents believe confrontations with men of color are not simply possible but are inevitable events. From their perspective, a violent encounter will happen, as

informed by racial understandings. The most frequently observed expression of racialized

James (22-year-old Pre-Law major) notes, “You know they want to [attack]. I can see it in their eyes.”

Similarly, Ben (24-year-old Sport Science major) explained, “Prepared Students is not about arming myself on campus. It is more about being armed when I walk past the “cholos” on the way home.” Attaching suspicion to specific bodies, Prepared Students’ leaders construct men of color as significant sources of vulnerability and agents of disruption. Thus, they assert arming themselves on campus provides a means of maintaining control in all areas of their lives in which they encounter the “other.”

The practice of connecting suspicion to groups is not always explicitly racialized. Prepared Students’ leadership often utilize implied colorblind language to communicate the specific persons defined as suspicious. Perceived sources of vulnerability are identified, but intentional wording is employed to obfuscate their racialized nature, as displayed by Richard (23-years-old Political Science Major) below:

I never even owned a gun until I moved to Townsville and the area I lived in was...(long pause)...like Boyz n the Hood. You know...uh uh uh uh...loud music and dropped down cars and all that shit. Now some of those people just dress like that and they will probably get profiled for it. That sucks, but it’s what we have to do to make sure the people we love are safe. [Emphasis added]

Respondents always identify the source of their vulnerability. Still, they frequently use seemingly neutral language, like Richard’s reference to “Boyz n the Hood,” to disguise any racial bias informing their ideas of suspicion and a subsequent need to carry a firearm. Yet, the language used to conceal racial bias often betrays its user and reveals bias just below the surface. Claiming a firearm was not warranted until he moved to an area like “Boyz n the Hood,” Richard identifies poor Black men as suspicious and requiring him to arm himself without using those exact words. Hunter (26-year-old Business major) further illustrates this trend in his explanation that the “weed-smoking rappers in the hall” of his apartment motivated his decision to purchase a handgun. Hunter’s appeal to racial stereotypes exemplifies the common practice of Prepared Students’ leaders of using seemingly race-neutral language in identifying specific groups they define as suspicious and requiring concealed firearms on campus.

Participants’ feelings of suspicion and vulnerability were also attached to an alleged lack of value placed on life by men of color. Possibly

informed by media depictions of men of color as firearm wielding threats (Majors and Billson 1993), respondents frequently contrasted law-abiding whites with deviant “others.” Arguing gun control efforts expose him to vulnerable contexts, Bill (22-years-old Biology major) explained:

...these little black kids are going to keep killing each other with illegal guns no matter what. We [whites] don't do that. We get our guns the right way, lock them up, and just respect life. That's not the case with them. They just don't care.

Bill's framing of the “little black kids” as almost inherently vice-driven is common across the narratives collected from Prepared Students' leadership. References to men of color as “thugs” and “gangbangers” without respect for life or law permeated their narratives of vulnerability, as observed in David's (24-year-old Business major) claim that “They are just a bunch of thugs that don't value the life of another person.” A similar sentiment is observed in Aaron's (23-year-old Political Science major) statement that “Their music is nice down there...the people...not so much. The people there don't care what the laws are. They do whatever the hell they want.” Echoing centuries-old pro-white/ anti-other narratives (Feagin 2013), Prepared Students' leaders construct men of color as social deviants deserving suspicion and taking up of arms. At times, this argument even extends to entire communities of color, as observed in David's claim that “the culture in those places is just so fucked...we just need to gut the whole area.” Framing the “other” in this manner, Prepared Students' leadership believes permitting concealed carry on campus is the only means of minimizing their vulnerability.

As described above, respondents reported feelings of vulnerability associated with viewing men of color as suspicious. They also expressed notions of vulnerability stemming from beliefs about changes in the American social landscape. Specifically, participants asserted immigrants from Mexico and Central America are deviants creating widespread vulnerability throughout the United States. Their arguments are discussed below.

The Disrupting Immigrant

Well, just think about where I'm at...right on the [Mexican] border. Those fuckers are coming over here every day, and you know they are up to no good...If these people are going to break these laws, what's to stop them from breaking more? What's it going to take for us to stop allowing

criminals in our country? Killing somebody? Raping somebody? I'll be damned if I allow those fuckers near my wife or kids.

- Brad (19-year-old Criminal Justice Major)

While most respondents connected men of color with a feeling of vulnerability, an almost equal number (76%) identified immigrants as major contributors to their sense of openness and need to carry a firearm. Specifically, participants viewed immigrants from Mexico and Central America as inherently criminal and threats to social order. As observed above in Brad's statement, Prepared Students' leaders hold that undocumented immigrants, through entering or staying in the country illegally, have displayed their true deviant character and pose a direct threat to society. Topics of particular interest for respondents were potential murders or sexual assaults. Reiterating the concerns raised by Brad, Walt (21-year-old Criminal Justice major) explained, “Every day you see a story about [immigrants] raping and killing some young girl. I will kill each and every last one of those fuckers before they touch my daughter.” Similarly, stressing the importance of being armed on campus, Bill noted:

One of my buddies was walking to his car one day after class, and one of those Mexicans tried to steal his car. When he fought back, he was cut from his ass to his ankles. Had he been able to carry, that would not have happened. When that Mexican fucker pulled out his knife, Brent could have shot him dead.

These concerns are not unique to the men noted above. They permeate most of the interviews with Prepared Students' leaders describing their sense of vulnerability. Across geographic location, major, and classification, similar discussions of murder and sexual assault carried out by immigrants almost always accompanied participants' references to immigration as a contributor to their vulnerability. In each conversation in which these issues arose, deploying a firearm was prescribed as the only means of minimizing vulnerability.

Prepared Students' leaders extend their personal sense of vulnerability to include a broad societal vulnerability in which the United States itself is experiencing a loss of control. Undocumented immigrants are framed not only as deviant but in many instances, as a singular hostile invading force requiring American citizens to arm themselves. Adopting the language of invasion, Prepared Students' leaders view themselves as patriots defending the United States from a foreign enemy. As Garrett (22-year-old Criminal Justice major) notes:

Fucking wetbacks are taking our country...I mean, really, look around any campus in this country, and you'll see it. We really don't have anything anymore...This is our country, but if we lose our right to bear arms, we will completely lose it.

For many participants, arming themselves is far more than a simple matter of increasing personal protection from a generic threat. The decision to carry a firearm and advocate for concealed carry on campus directly responds to the assumed national threat posed by immigrants. Arming oneself is viewed as a means of fulfilling a responsibility to defend the country, as Ryan (23-year-old Accounting major) argued:

This just isn't our [whites] country anymore. We have to take it back. You know they say this is going to be more or less a new New Mexico in the next hundred years? We can't let that happen to our country. We're Americans!

Ideas of defending a vulnerable society influence all aspects of Prepared Students, including its social activities, which are spending time at firing ranges. When asked about time at the gun range, Dillon explained:

Dillon: Well I mean we get there, decide what we want to shoot and go at it.

Interviewer: So you shoot paper targets?

Dillon: Yes, there are some pretty cool ones out there too. The place I like just got in some new targets that look like the Mexican army. We used to have some old Obama ones, but these new ones are pretty cool.

Interviewer: Oh, yea? What do they look like?

Dillon: You know, just some wetback. Haha, That sounds fucking racist, huh? Haha, It's an "illegal immigrant." Some of them even have guns or drugs with them—just basic shit like that.

Interviewer: Why do you think the owner of the range selected those specific targets over something else or just a silhouette?

(This question made Dillon visible uncomfortable.)

Dillon: (Speaking much louder and more harshly) How the hell am I supposed to know... you see what's going on down where you are. Mexicans are invading our country.

Respondents do not merely believe they need to be armed to defend themselves or their vulnerable country. They actively train for it in social situations like the one Dillon describes above. Tyler (30-year-

old Business major), who has since left the organization due to these practices, recounted members of his chapter "putting sombreros on targets." The firing range serves almost as participants' stage, equipped with the props needed to enact the heroic fantasy violence of reclaiming/defending one's country. As observed throughout this section, Prepared Students' leaders view immigrants almost exclusively as "fuckers" and "wetbacks" seeking to pillage the United States. Thus, they believe it is their patriotic duty to arm themselves, defend their families, and save their vulnerable society.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of narratives in shaping the membership of Prepared Students, the largest student-based gun rights organization in the United States. It relied on Systemic Racism Theory and its cognitive element, the white racial frame, to understand how Prepared Students' leaders construct the need to carry firearms on campus and how these storylines' elements influence the organization's membership. Identifying a reliance on racialized vulnerability narratives provides insight into understanding the reproduction of Prepared Students' mostly White male membership. The storylines highlighted in this study reveal underlying pro-white/anti-other and nativist ideologies influencing Prepared Students' leadership's constructions of reality. Given these findings, the reason Prepared Students continue to reproduce as a mostly homogenous organization becomes more apparent. The foundational beliefs guiding Prepared Students as an organization exclude diversity. As Tyler notes, "if you don't look like me (white), they don't want you there." Similarly, former member Wade (27-year-old Computer Science major), described Prepared Students as a "bunch of conservative white guys... pissed off they aren't on top anymore." The findings of this study support the arguments offered by Tyler and Wade.

This study extends the sociological literature on student gun ownership and Prepared Students as an organization in five important ways: 1) It offers the concept of racialized vulnerability as a means of understanding vulnerability narratives heavily influenced by racial difference; 2) It highlights the foundational role of racialized vulnerability in Prepared Students; 3) It develops the racialized emotion of suspicion through analyzing student motivations to purchase firearms; 4) It explores the nuance of anti-immigrant attitudes within a national student gun rights organization; and 5) It illuminates,

at least in part, why Prepared Students has remained a largely homogenous organization.

Limitation and Future Research

While significant efforts were made to ensure the quality of this study, it is not without limitations. First, participants disproportionately represented the southern United States. Regional differences heavily impact cultural attitudes related to racial disparity and firearm ownership (Nisbett and Cohen 1996). It is possible the overrepresentation of students from the southern U.S. had a disproportionate impact on the findings in this study. Second, interrater reliability was not able to be established. When respondents agreed to participate in this study, they were told only the researcher would have access to their raw and uncoded interviews. Organization gatekeepers heavily recommended this concession to gain access to the population of interest. It is possible that additional researchers' analysis of the raw interviews could have identified additional trends and storylines within the data and offer critiques of the narratives discussed in this paper.

Future research on Prepared Students should work to establish both broader regional representation of participants and interrater reliability. Additionally, further research should explore how the members of Prepared Students differ from their peers in their understanding of being vulnerable to crime.

Conclusion

In summary, this study examined the influence of racial framing in shaping the vulnerability narratives guiding Prepared Students. Feelings of suspicion towards men of color and viewing immigrants as a national threat were identified as critical elements in constructing Prepared Students' vulnerability narratives. These findings are significant in that they provide the sociological community with an understanding of a previously escaped meaningful analysis phenomenon. Prepared Students' agenda is finding an increasingly favorable audience with state legislatures despite a lack of substantive research on Prepared Students or the ramifications of concealed carry on campus. This study's findings serve to inform firearm policy on college and university campuses across the U.S. by offering an analysis of the beliefs fueling the nation's largest student-based gun rights organization's desire to carry firearms on campus.

References

Alba, Richard D., and Victor Nee. 2009. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Burawoy, Michael, Alice Burton, Ann Arnett Ferguson, Kathryn J. Fox, Joshua Gamson, Leslie Hurst, Nadine G. Julius, Charles Kurzman, Leslie Salzinger, Josepha Schiffman, and Shiori Ui. 1991. *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press
- Braman, Donald, and Dan M. Kahan. 2006. "Overcoming the Fear of guns, the Fear of Gun Control, and the Fear of Cultural Politics: Constructing a Better Gun Debate." *Emory Law Journal* 55(4): 569-607.
- Carlson, Jennifer. 2012. "I don't dial 911: American Gun Politics and the Problem of Policing." *British Journal of Criminology* 52(6): 1113-1132.
- Carlson, Jennifer. 2013. "The Equalizer?: Crime, Vulnerability, and Gender in Pro-gun Discourse." *Feminist Criminology* 9(1): 59-83.
- Cavanaugh, Michael R., Jeffery A. Bouffard, William Wells, and Matthew R. Nobles. 2012. "Student Attitudes Toward Concealed Handguns on Campus at Two Universities." *American Journal of Public Health* 102(12): 2245-2247.
- Couch, Todd C. 2017. "Good Guys with Guns? A Qualitative Analysis of Racially Framed Narratives within Students for Concealed Carry on Campus." *Issues in Race and Society* 5(3): 25-43
- Couch, Todd C. 2020. "A Qualitative Analysis of the Vulnerability Narratives of Student Gun Rights Advocates." *Sociological Research Online* 00(0) 1-16
- Cutter, Susan L. Bryan J. Boruff B, and W. Lynn Shirley. 2003. "Social Vulnerability to Environmental Hazards." *Social Science Quarterly* 84(1): 242-261
- Donovan, Brian. 2006. *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism 1887-1917*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press
- Douglas, Kathy A., Janet L. Collins, Charles Warren, Laura Kann, Robert Gold, Sonia Clayton, James G. Ross, and Lloyd J. Kolbe. 1997. "Results from the 1995 National College Health Risk Behavior Survey." *Journal of American College Health* 46(2): 55-66.
- Dragiewicz, Molly. 2008. "Patriarchy Reasserted: Fathers' Rights and Anti-VAWA Activism." *Feminist Criminology* 3(2): 121-144
- Feagin, Joe R. 2006. *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. New York: Routledge
- Feagin, Joe R. 2018. *Racist America*. New York: Routledge.
- Feagin, Joe R. 2013. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.

- Goldberg, David Theo. 2002. *The Racial State*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing
- Gua, Jacinta A. 2008. "A Neighborhood-level Analysis of Concealed Handgun Permits." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies* 34(4): 674-693.
- Hollander, Jocelyn A. 2001. "Vulnerability and Dangerousness: The Construction of Gender through Conversations about Violence." *Gender & Society* 15(1): 83-109
- Kahan, Dan M. and Donald Black. 2003. "More Statistics, Less Persuasion: A Cultural Theory of Gun-risk Perceptions." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 151(1): 1291-1327.
- Killias, Martin. 1990. "Vulnerability: Towards a Better Understanding of a Key Variable in the Genesis of Fear of Crime." *Violence and Victims* 5(2): 97-108
- Krippendorff, Klaus. 1980. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Melzer, Scott. 2012 *Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War*. New York: New York University Press.
- Miller, Matthew, David Hemenway, and Henry Wechsler. 2002. "Guns and Gun Threats at College." *Journal of American College Health* 51(2): 57-65.
- Newman, Katherine S., Cybell Fox, David J. Harding, Jal Mehta, and Wendy Roth. *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*. New York: Basic Books
- Nisbet, Richard E. and Dov Cohen. 1996. *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press
- Noy, Chaim. 2008. "Sampling knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 1 (4): 327-344.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge
- O'Neill Kevin L. 2007. "Armed Citizens and the Stories They Tell: The National Rifle Association's Achievement of Terror and Masculinity." *Men and Masculinity* 9(4): 457-475.
- Rasmussen, Chris and Gina Johnson. 2008. "The Ripple Effect of Virginia Tech: Assessing the Nationwide Impact on Campus Safety and Security Policy and Practice." *Midwestern Higher Education Compact*.
- Soboroff, Shane, William Lovekamp, and Robert Jenkot. 2019. "Social Status and the Effects of Legal Concealed Firearms on College Campuses." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 30(3): 376-388
- Smith, Donald A. and Craig D. Uchida. 1988. "The Social Organization of Self-help: A Study of Defensive Weapon Ownership." *American Sociological Review* 53(1): 94-102.
- Stroud, Angela. 2012. "Good Guys with Guns: Hegemonic Masculinity and Concealed Handguns." *Gender & Society* 26(2): 216-238.
- Thompson, Amy, James H. Price, Joseph Dake, and Karen Teeple. 2013. "Faculty Perceptions and Practices Regarding Carrying Concealed Handguns on University Campuses." *Journal of Community Health* 38(1):366-373.
- Ture, Kwame and Charles V. Hamilton. 1992. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. New York: Vintage Books
- Williams-Myers, A.J. 1994. *Destructive Impulses*. New York: University Press of America.
- Wingfield, Adia Harvey and Joe R. Feagin. 2013. *Yes we can? White Racial Framing and the Obama Presidency*. New York: Routledge.
- Young, Robert L., David McDowall, and Colin Loftin. 1987. "Collective Security and the Ownership of Firearms for Protection." *Criminology* 25(1): 1-24.