

JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

Testimony on H-5436, Ban on Assault Weapons

House Judiciary Committee

March 26, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Craven and members of the House Judiciary Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**, and I serve as the **Director of Program Implementation and Policy** at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity.

I express my **strong support** for **H-5436 – An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses – Rhode Island Assault Weapons Ban Act of 2025**, sponsored by Representative Knight and co-sponsored by Representatives Caldwell, Boylan, Speakman, McEntee, Ajello, Kazarian, Craven, Dawson, and Felix.

This legislation **seeks to enhance public safety by regulating the possession, sale, and transfer of defined assault weapons in Rhode Island.**

Definition of Assault Weapons Under H-5436

H-5436 defines “assault weapons” as certain semi-automatic firearms with specific military-style features that enhance lethality. These include:

- **Semi-automatic rifles** with a detachable magazine and a least one of the following:
 - Folding/telescoping stock
 - Pistol grip
 - Bayonet mount
 - Flash suppressor or threaded barrel
 - Grenade launcher
- **Semi-automatic pistols** with a detachable magazine and at least one of the following:
 - Magazine attachment outside the pistol grip
 - Threaded barrel
 - Barrel shroud
 - Unloaded weight over 50 ounces
 - Semi-automatic version of an automatic firearm
- **Semi-automatic shotguns** with one or more of the following:
 - Folding or telescoping stock
 - Pistol grip
 - Fixed magazine exceeding five rounds
 - Detachable magazine capability

The Public Health and Public Safety Crisis

Gun violence is a leading cause of premature death in the United States, and according to the **American Public Health Association, it is a public health crisis.**¹ Yet, gun violence is not inevitable.

¹ American Public Health Association, “GUN VIOLENCE IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS”; American Public Health Association, “Gun Violence Is a Public Health Crisis.”

We must be clear: this legislation is not about the Second Amendment. It is about public safety. It is about public safety. It is about keeping communities, schools, and workplaces safe from preventable harm. Public health and public safety are fundamentally intertwined.² When people do not feel safe—when trauma, fear, and violence become normalized—it undermines mental health, disrupts families, and places enormous strain on health systems. Implementing evidence-based intervention, such as a ban on assault weapons, can save lives and prevent harm.³⁴

Public Health Implications of Assault Weapons

Increased Mortality and Morbidity

Assault weapons, particularly those equipped with high-capacity magazines, are designed for rapid fire and maximum damage. Each round has greater muzzle velocity than typical handgun ammunition, leading to more catastrophic injuries. High-capacity magazines allow shooters to fire dozens of rounds in seconds without reloading – amplifying lethality in public settings.⁵

Research consistently shows that incidents involving assault weapons result in significantly more injuries and deaths than those involving other firearms. For example:

- A **Brigham and Women’s Hospital** study of 248 FBI-documented active shooter incidents (2000-2017) found that semiautomatic rifles resulted in higher injuries and casualties than other weapons.⁶
- A **University of Colorado** study of 184 fatal mass shootings (1966 and 2023) found that those involving assault weapons caused more injuries and fatalities.⁷
- A **New York University School of Medicine** study (1981-2017) found that assault rifles accounted for 85.8% of mass-shooting fatalities in their dataset. During the years the federal assault weapons ban was in effect, there was a 70% decrease in mass shooting fatalities.⁸

Similarly, analysis of mass shooting between 2009 and 2017 found that 58% involved firearms with high-capacity magazines. These shootings resulted in twice the fatalities and 14 times the injuries compared to those without.

From 2015 to 2022, shootings involving assault weapons and high-capacity magazines led to:

- **Nearly 6x more people shot**
- **2x more fatalities**
- **23x more people wounded**, compared to incidents without them

The lethality of these weapons poses a significant threat to public health, public safety, and significantly increase the risk and scope of harm in violent incidents.

² Benjamin, “Gun Violence Is an Epidemic. It Is Time for a Public Health Response.”

³ Barna, “Evidence-Based Policies Reduce Gun Violence — Forum Showcases Science, Policies, Solutions to End US Epidemic.”

⁴ American Public Health Association, “Gun Violence Is a Public Health Crisis”; American Public Health Association, “GUN VIOLENCE IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS”; Samuelson, “Federal Assault Weapons Ban Could Have Prevented 38 Mass Shootings since 2005”; Webster, “Policies That Reduce Gun Violence.”

⁵ Brady United, “Assault Weapons and Large-Capacity Magazines”; Everytown Research & Policy, “Prohibit Assault Weapons.”

⁶ de Jager et al., “Lethality of Civilian Active Shooter Incidents With and Without Semiautomatic Rifles in the United States.”

⁷ Barnard et al., “Firearm Type and Number of People Killed in Publicly Targeted Fatal Mass Shooting Events.”

⁸ DiMaggio et al., “Changes in US Mass Shooting Deaths Associated with the 1994-2004 Federal Assault Weapons Ban.”

Psychological Impact on Communities

Gun violence inflicts trauma far beyond the immediate victims. The fear of mass shootings in schools, places of worship, and public spaces erodes trust, safety, and mental well-being.

- Exposure to gun violence has been linked to increased rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance misuse.⁹
- A 2020 study found that local exposure to school shootings significantly increased youth antidepressant use.¹⁰
- Community violence intervention workers themselves report experiencing secondary traumatic stress from repeated exposure to gun violence.¹¹

Healthcare Costs and System Strain

Injuries from assault weapons impose enormous economic and healthcare burdens. A national analysis estimated:

- Average hospital admission costs:
 - Assault weapons: **\$32,237** per admission
 - Shotgun: **\$23,026** per admission
- Total estimated annual cost of assault weapons: over **\$52 million**¹²

These figures don't include costs from readmissions, rehabilitation, or the long-term burden on families and communities. These injuries divert critical resources from already overstretched health systems and public health priorities.

Effectiveness of Assault Weapons Bans

A growing body of research demonstrates that banning assault weapons can help to prevent gun violence, and particularly mass shootings. Studies of both the lapsed federal assault weapons ban, and state-level assault weapons bans show that these laws help to reduce fatalities and injuries from mass shootings, as well as the use of assault weapons in crime.

- After the federal assault weapons ban expired in 2004, the prevalence of high-capacity firearms used in crime **increased by over 100%**¹³
- The ban is estimated to have prevented **11 mass shootings**¹⁴

⁹ Mental Health America, "Prevention and Early Intervention in Mental Health-Consequences of Failing Our Children."

¹⁰ DiMaggio et al., "Changes in US Mass Shooting Deaths Associated with the 1994-2004 Federal Assault Weapons Ban"; Ranney et al., "What Are the Long-Term Consequences of Youth Exposure to Firearm Injury, and How Do We Prevent Them?"; Rossin-Slater et al., "Local Exposure to School Shootings and Youth Antidepressant Use."

¹¹ Hureau et al., "The Experience of Secondary Traumatic Stress among Community Violence Interventionists in Chicago."

¹² Peek-Asa, Butcher, and Cavanaugh, "Cost of Hospitalization for Firearm Injuries by Firearm Type, Intent, and Payer in the United States."

¹³ Koper et al., "Criminal Use of Assault Weapons and High-Capacity Semiautomatic Firearms."

¹⁴ Post et al., "Impact of Firearm Surveillance on Gun Control Policy."

- Researchers estimated that the ban would have prevented **70% of mass shooting deaths** had it remained in place¹⁵
- Mass shootings in which six or more people were killed **increased by 347%** since the ban ended¹⁶
- In Washington state, banning assault weapons for individuals under 21 resulted in a **decline in firearm violence** and youth-involved assault weapon incidents¹⁷
- States with assault weapon bans have **fewer mass shootings, lower firearm death rates, and lower economic burdens** from gun violence¹⁸

Currently, **nine states and D.C.** ban assault weapons.¹⁹ Rhode Island has the opportunity to join these states in prioritizing public safety and public health.

Conclusion

We will not end all gun violence with this bill- but we will save lives. A ban on assault weapons is a necessary public health intervention.

House Bill 5436 is a common-sense, data-driven policy to reduce death, trauma, and injury. By enacting this legislation, we can reduce the incidence of firearm-related violence, alleviate the burden on our healthcare system, and promote a safer environment for all. I urge the committee to support this bill and recommend its passage.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jocelyn Antonio, MPH
joantoni@bu.edu

¹⁵ Everytown Research & Policy, “ASSAULT WEAPONS AND HIGH-CAPACITY MAGAZINES.”

¹⁶ “Bulletin.”

¹⁷ Bhullar et al., “Washington State Assault Weapon Firearm Violence Before and After Firearm Legislation Reform”; Gius, “The Impact of State and Federal Assault Weapons Bans on Public Mass Shootings.”

¹⁸ Brady United, “From Trauma to Prevention.”

¹⁹ Everytown Research & Policy, “Assault Weapons Prohibited.”

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