

# JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

## Testimony on H-5891, Minimum Age and Firearms Possession 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 am writing to express my **strong support** for **H-5891 – An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses – Weapons**, sponsored by Representative Serpa and co-sponsored by Representatives Ajello, Donovan, and Knight.

This legislation **specifies that it is unlawful for any person under the age of 18 to possess a firearm** – an essential public health intervention to prevent injury, death, and trauma among Rhode Island’s youth.

### Public Health Implications of Youth Firearm Access

Firearm-related injuries and deaths are one of the most pressing public health crises facing youth in the United States.

- Firearms are the **leading cause of death** for young people ages 18 to 20.<sup>1</sup>
- Among youth ages 10–17, in 2020, **firearms were used in 87% of all homicides and 41% of all suicides.**<sup>2</sup>
- Between 2014 and 2023, **firearm suicides among minors increased by 40%.**<sup>3</sup>
- Individuals aged 18 to 20 commit gun homicides at **more than triple the rate** of adults 21 and older.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2019, over **28,000 youth ages 10 to 21 were arrested** for weapons-related offenses - 26% of such arrests.<sup>5</sup> years of age were responsible for a disproportionate share of school shootings, public mass shootings, and gun violence.<sup>6</sup>

Access to firearms at young ages significantly increases the risk of violence, suicide, and unintentional injury. Setting a clear legal minimum age of 18 for firearm possession is a key preventive measure.

### Evidence Behind Minimum Age Laws

Public health research supports raising the minimum legal age for firearm access:

- States with minimum age laws and permit-to-purchase requirements see **lower rates of firearm suicide** among young adults<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Center for Health Statistics, “Data Are from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 2018-2023, as Compiled from Data Provided by the 57 Vital Statistics Jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program.”

<sup>2</sup> Mattson, Sigel, and Mercado, “Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Youth Firearm Access, Possession or Carrying.”

<sup>3</sup> Giffords Law Center, “Minimum Age.”

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Center for Health Statistics, “Data Are from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 2018-2023, as Compiled from Data Provided by the 57 Vital Statistics Jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program.”

<sup>5</sup> RI Coalition Against Gun Violence, “21+ to Purchase Firearms and Ammunition | Rhode Island Coalition Against Gun Violence.”

<sup>6</sup> Schildkraut, “Can Mass Shootings Be Stopped? To Address the Problem, We Must Better Understand the Phenomenon”; Reeping et al., “State Firearm Laws, Gun Ownership, and K-12 School Shootings.”

<sup>7</sup> “Child Access & Safe Storage”; Raifman et al., “State Handgun Purchase Age Minimums in the US and Adolescent Suicide Rates”; Fridel, Zimmerman, and Arrigo, “Examining the Impact of Minimum Handgun Purchase Age and Background Check Legislation on Young Adult Suicide in the United States, 1991–2020.”

- Firearm-related **homicides increased by 14% and suicides 39%** among youth ages 15-24 in the last decade.<sup>8</sup>
- Among all youth firearm deaths:
  - **58% were homicides**
  - **37% were suicides**
  - **2% were unintentional**
  - **1% were legal interventions**<sup>9</sup>

These statistics are not inevitable—they are preventable. Policies like H-5891 are grounded in data that show even modest restrictions on access can lead to measurable reductions in harm.

### **Mental Health and Community Well-Being**

Exposure to firearm violence has detrimental effects on the mental health of children and adolescents, leading to outcomes such as anger, withdrawal, post-traumatic stress, and desensitization to violence.<sup>10</sup> By restricting firearm possession among individuals under 18, we can reduce the likelihood of youth involvement in firearm-related incidents, thereby mitigating these adverse psychological effects and fostering safer communities.

### **Conclusion**

Gun violence is not just a criminal justice issues – it is a public health emergency. Currently, 42 states and Washington, DC have laws setting a minimum age for firearm possession.<sup>11</sup> Rhode Island should not be the exception.

House Bill 5890 represents an approach to enhancing public health and safety in Rhode Island by restricting firearm possession among individuals under the age of eighteen, which other states are already doing. This legislative measure can reduce youth gun deaths, protect mental health, and strengthen public safety.

I urge the committee to support and pass this bill to protect the well-being of our young residents and promote a safer environment for all.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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<sup>8</sup> Lee et al., “Firearm-Related Injuries and Deaths in Children and Youth.”

<sup>9</sup> Lee et al.

<sup>10</sup> Mental Health America, “Prevention and Early Intervention in Mental Health-Consequences of Failing Our Children”; 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.”

<sup>11</sup> Everytown, “Everytown Research - EveryStat.”

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