

January 27, 2026
The Honorable Evan P. Shanley, Chair
House State Government and Elections Committee
Rhode Island Statehouse
Providence, 02903

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in **strong support of House Bill 7236**. My name is Dr. Jessica Kiebler and I am a Rhode Island resident hoping to provide compelling information that urges you to vote in support of H7236. I am a doctoral graduate from the University of Michigan holding a PhD in both Psychology and Women's & Gender Studies. My research expertise is centered on economic inequity and oppression in the context of the United States as it relates to a history of systemic oppression perpetuated through policy at the local, state and national level.

Amid growing attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion across the country, the resurgence of neoliberal ideology is unmistakable. As a trained social psychological researcher, the evidence is clear: we cannot separate ourselves from the social conditions we live in. Our society is steeped in ideas of success that prioritize individual effort, competition, and personal responsibility, while asking us to ignore systemic inequality—despite extensive research showing how deeply rooted and persistent oppression remains.^{i,ii,iii,iv,v}

Research consistently demonstrates that social mobility is far more constrained than popular narratives suggest. Rather than rising through merit alone, most people remain in the social class they are born into due to economic systems historically shaped by systemic racism^{vi}. As scholars note, “colonial legacies continue to influence modes of production, knowledge systems, wealth distribution, and the movement of people and resources across borders” (p. 5).^{vii}

These patterns are clearly visible in Rhode Island. Black maternal and infant mortality rates far exceed those of white residents^{viii,ix}. Average household incomes remain disproportionately low among Black and Brown Rhode Islanders^x. Students of Color lag behind white students in reading outcomes^{xi}. Black residents are significantly more likely to be incarcerated, and Rhode Island has one of the nation's widest racial disparities in youth incarceration, with Black youth nearly ten times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers^{xii,xiii,xiv}.

These examples are numerous and exhausting. Requiring further proof of the need for this bill—and for protections for our most vulnerable communities—places an unjust burden on those already harmed by these systems. It is time to hold our legislation to a higher standard.

Beyond my professional expertise in economic inequity rooted in systemic racism, sexism, and related forms of oppression, I am also a direct beneficiary of equity-driven policies that were hard-won and are now increasingly under threat. I am the daughter of a single teenage mother who relied on the limited social safety nets available at the time of my birth. We moved in and out of shelters and depended on WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, and other programs to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads. My mother instilled in me the importance of fighting for people who grow up like we did. Yet as a single teenage parent struggling to survive, she could not realistically show up at the State House to advocate for those rights herself. That reality underscores why it is essential to have decision-makers in the room who understand and prioritize the needs of people most impacted by policy. These decisions determine whether families can eat, where they can sleep, who they are allowed to marry, which schools receive adequate funding, and how communities are supported in the face of federal overreach.

While I believe many elected officials are committed to doing what is right, safeguarding vulnerable communities cannot depend on goodwill alone. **House Bill 7263 would require that legislators receive data-driven information about the real-world impacts on families like mine—families who cannot show up to advocate because we are already fighting daily battles to stay housed, fed, and safe.** If I were entrusted with the responsibility of voting on policies that affect the lives of more than a million Rhode Islanders, I would want every possible piece of information to make an informed, accountable decision. I hope you would expect—and demand—the same of yourselves.

Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱ Perez, M. J., & Salter, P. S. (2019). Trust, innocence, and individual responsibility: Neoliberal dreams of a colorblind peace. *Social Issues*, 75(1), 267-285. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12317>

ⁱⁱ Son Hing, L. S. (2013). Stigmatization, Neoliberalism, and Resilience. (p. 158-182). In *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* Ed. Hall, P. A. & Lamont, M. (2013). Cambridge University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

^{iv} Bay-Cheng, L. Y., Fitz, C. C., Alizaga, N. M., & Zucker, A. N. (2015). Tracking homo-oeconomicus: Development of the neoliberal beliefs inventory. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 3(1), 71-88.

^v Arfken, M. (2018). From resisting neoliberalism to neoliberalizing resistance. *Theory & Psychology*, 28(5). <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1177/095935431880039>

^{vi} Case, A. & Deaton, A. (2020). *Deaths of despair and the future of capitalism*. Princeton University Press.

^{vii} Segalo, P. & Fine, M. (2020). Under lying conditions of gender-based violence-Decolonial feminism meets epistemic ignorance: Critical transnational conversations. *Social Personal Psychological Compass*, 14.

^{viii} Rhode Island Department of Health. (2025, April). Maternal and child health (MCH) report to the legislature. <https://health.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur1006/files/2025-04/2024-MCH-Legislative-Report.pdf>

^{ix} Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (2025). 2025 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT factbook. rikidscount.org

^x Neilsberg. (2025, March 1). Rhode Island median household income by race.

<https://www.neilsberg.com/insights/rhode-island-median-household-income-by-race/>

^{xi} Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (2025, April 18). Racial and ethnic disparities. <https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/RacialandEthnicDisparities.pdf>

^{xiii} The Sentencing Project. (2025, August 12). Black disparities in youth incarceration. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/black-disparities-in-youth-incarceration/>

^{xiv} Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (2025, January 2). Youth in the justice system. <https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/YouthIntheJusticeSystem.pdf>

^{xv} Prison Policy Initiative. (2026, January 14). Rhode Island profile. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/RI.html>