



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2637, An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses –
Weapons**

Senate Judiciary Committee

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. We would also like to thank Senator Goodwin, for sponsoring this important bill and Senators Miller, Coyne, DiMario, Lawson, Cano, Kallman, Murray, Quezada, and Zurier for co-sponsoring. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for Senate Bill 2637 which would increase the age from 18 to 21 years for lawful sale of rifles/shotguns, firearms, or ammunition, with the exemption of full-time law enforcement, state marshals and members of the U.S. military.

Children and youth can experience gun violence as victims of firearm assaults, self-inflicted firearm injuries, or accidental shootings. Gun violence also can impact children and youth when someone they know is the victim or perpetrator of a shooting. Exposure to violence at home, in schools, and in the community can lead to lasting psychological and emotional damage, including post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, behavioral problems, depression, anxiety, cognitive and attention difficulties, delinquent acts like assault and property destruction, and adult criminal behavior.

Nationally and in Rhode Island, gun reform remains a key area of focus, especially in the wake of several tragic school and mass shootings in recent years. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT believes comprehensive state policies to reduce gun violence, including raising the age of eligibility to purchase a firearm are overdue.

Preventing access to guns is an important measure in preventing firearm-related injuries and death in children and youth. Homicide and suicide are the leading causes of firearm related injuries and deaths among adolescents. In the U.S. during 2019, 60% (2,023) of the 3,390 firearm deaths of children and youth under age 20 were the result of homicide, and 34% (1,167) were the result of suicide. The presence and availability of a gun is strongly associated with adolescent suicide risk.

Senate Bill 2637 is a practical step to reduce both access to firearms and risk of injuries which increases the safety of children in Rhode Island.

Gun-Related Emergency Department (ED) Visits, Hospitalizations, and Deaths Among Children and Youth, Rhode Island, 2015-2019

AGE	# OF ED VISITS	# OF HOSPITALIZATIONS	# OF DEATHS
1 to 14	48	4	0
15 to 17	50	10	4
18 to 19	47	17	3
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>145</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>7</i>

Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, Center for Health Data and Analysis, 2015-2019.

In Rhode Island between 2015 and 2019, there were 145 emergency department visits, 31 hospitalizations, and 7 deaths of children and youth due to guns.

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the part of the brain that controls reasoning and helps us fully think through the implications of our behavior – the prefrontal cortex – goes through many structural changes throughout childhood and is not fully developed until at least age 26, and this can be further delayed when alcohol or drug use are present. This ongoing development of the prefrontal cortex means that adolescents make decisions and solve problems differently than adults. Adolescents are more likely to be impulsive, misread social and emotional situations, get into accidents and fights, and engage in risk taking behaviors. They are also less likely to avoid risky situations and to fully consider all possible consequences of their actions. Adolescents need guidance from caring adults to develop these skills and learn to manage their behaviors as their brain develops.

This law would reduce the likelihood that a child, or teen could gain access to a gun and use it to take his or her own life, a risk that is particularly urgent with the increase in depression and suicidality we have seen in association with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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We strongly urge you to pass Senate Bill 2637, which would ensure that children, teens, and young adults under the age of 21 are unable to purchase firearms or ammunition. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.