

Submitter: Steven Wales

On Behalf Of:

Committee: Senate Committee On Judiciary

Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB697

I respectfully submit this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 697, which would prohibit individuals under the age of 21 from possessing firearms, with only limited exceptions. While the goal of reducing gun violence is an understandable and worthy pursuit, this legislation takes an overly broad approach that undermines constitutional rights, ignores the maturity and legal responsibilities of many young adults, and fails to address the root causes of firearm-related crime.

At the heart of SB 697 lies a categorical age-based restriction: it assumes that individuals under 21, by virtue of age alone, are unfit to possess firearms. This assumption is both constitutionally and empirically problematic. Under federal and state law, 18-year-olds are recognized as legal adults. They can vote, serve on juries, enter into contracts, get married, and, crucially, serve in the armed forces where they are trained and entrusted with far more dangerous weapons than those typically available to civilians. To suggest that these same adults cannot be trusted to responsibly possess a personal firearm for lawful purposes—such as self-defense, sport, or hunting—is logically inconsistent and constitutionally suspect.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) and more recently in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen* (2022), affirmed that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to keep and bear arms for self-defense. Age-based prohibitions that categorically disarm a class of legal adults demand exacting scrutiny. SB 697 appears to sidestep this scrutiny by relying on speculative generalizations about risk and maturity, rather than demonstrating a clear, evidence-based connection between such restrictions and a reduction in gun violence.

Furthermore, this bill risks penalizing responsible young adults while doing little to deter those who already ignore the law. Most gun-related crimes committed by individuals under 21 are perpetrated by those who obtain firearms illegally or are already barred from possession. Enacting new prohibitions on law-abiding citizens does not address this problem—it merely creates a wider gap between those who follow the law and those who do not.

SB 697 also neglects the important role of firearms in rural and hunting communities, where young adults often learn firearm safety and marksmanship from a young age, and where hunting is a vital cultural and economic activity. The bill's exceptions are narrowly drawn and may fail to adequately protect traditional, lawful uses of firearms among youth who are otherwise acting responsibly and in accordance with community norms.

More broadly, age-based disarmament raises serious philosophical concerns about the nature of rights in a free society. If the state can deny a fundamental right to a class of legal adults based solely on age, without individualized due process, what limiting principle remains? Such an approach erodes the foundation of equal protection under the law and opens the door to further restrictions based not on behavior or threat, but on assumptions about group identity.

In sum, SB 697 is a blunt policy instrument that sacrifices individual rights for the appearance of safety. It fails to differentiate between lawful and unlawful use of firearms, ignores the realities of rural life and military service, and risks setting a dangerous precedent for the curtailment of rights based on age alone. I urge lawmakers to reject this legislation and instead pursue solutions that target criminal misuse, strengthen mental health services, and support community-based violence prevention—without infringing on the constitutional rights of responsible citizens.