

*HOUSE BILL 2042: Concealed carry licensure amendments under the personal and family protection act.
Testimony to: Senate Federal & State Affairs Committee*

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The Kansas Chapter of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence opposes HB 2042, especially the lowering of the legal concealed carry age from 21 to 18. This is particularly alarming now that concealed carry is allowed on public college campuses.

Even with the bill's sensible amendment requiring some safety training for campus gun carriers, the risks created by the lowered age more than cancel out that benefit.

In recent years, our state leaders have contended that liberalizing gun laws would improve public safety. It is not working. While concealed carry steadily has expanded to every state, our nation's gun violence statistics have remained stubbornly high even though violent crime numbers overall have declined. Now we are considering a bill that would expand this ineffective gambit by outfitting our youngest adults with lethal concealed firearms. Given the probable consequences, this is irresponsible.

When the FBI examined 160 active shooter events that occurred from 2000 to 2013, its researchers found only one incident involving an armed civilian who intervened to end an attack. Interestingly, they found that shooters in 21 of the 160 incidents were interrupted and restrained by unarmed civilians. This suggests unarmed intervention is more likely to be effective than armed intervention.

While the crime-fighting effectiveness of expanded lethal weapon possession is unsubstantiated, it unquestionably worsens firearms dangers such as suicides, accidents and thefts.

A recent survey by Everytown for Gun Safety identified 85 campus firearms shootings and undesirable discharges from 2013 through June 2016. Only two of the 85 involved a shooter on a rampage. The most common incidents were disputes that turned into gun violence (45%), premeditated violence against an individual (12%), suicides and murder/suicides (12%) and unintentional shootings and discharges (9%). More guns only will fuel more of the same.

Among inadequately addressed gun violence problems, the most troubling in Kansas is suicide. Lowering the concealed carry age greatly exacerbates this risk at a time when we must be focused on solutions. The threat is increased by a lower carrying age simply because more young people will possess and carry firearms. Unless those guns always are properly secured there is a suicide risk not just to the guns' owners but to everyone else with access.

About 60 percent of all gun-related deaths nationally are suicides. Suicidal behavior is particularly high in the college-age years. Research repeatedly shows that firearms access increases suicide rates. (Miller & Barber, "Annual review of public health," 2012) (Miller, Azrael & Hemenway, "Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery," 2002)

Firearms suicide attempts succeed almost 90 percent of the time, while other forms result in death far less often.

A 2015 national survey of undergraduate students found that 9 percent had "seriously considered attempting suicide" over the past 12 months, and another 1.4 percent did attempt suicide.

The Kansas Suicide Prevention Resource Center reports that suicide is the second leading cause of death in the 15-24 age range in our state. Firearms were by far the most common suicide method (255 cases in 2016). They were almost twice as common as the second-leading method (132 by suffocation).

Nationally, the youth suicide rate went up each from year 2013 through 2015 (the most recent years national statistics were available). Kansas suicides are rising as well.

Again, the facts indicate that the Kansas youth gun violence crisis most deserving attention and legislative action is suicide. The numbers most certainly make clear that our state should reject a policy change that only can exacerbate this firearms danger. Especially when the proposed policy tries to address by dubious means a non-existent violent crime problem on campuses.

If we effectively prohibit 18- to 20-year-old gun possession and carrying on campuses, then there will be no suicides with guns unless one is taken from a 21-or-older individual. There also will be no gun thefts, no gun accidents and no guns available to escalate a dispute or fight into a deadly encounter.

It is true that a few irresponsible people illegally bring a gun onto campus occasionally. We know from the experience of a Kansas State student having accidentally shot himself last year with a gun he illegally possessed. Adding more guns to the college environment obviously makes that kind of incident, and worse, more likely.

Medical science also gives us strong evidence that youthful gun carrying is reckless. Widely documented and reported studies tell us that the parts of the brain supporting self-control, impulse control, judgement and decision-making are still in early development during college years. People this age also are more sensitive to psychological stress.

Another troubling factor is alcohol consumption. A survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that nearly 60 percent of 18- to 22-year-old college students reported drinking the past month, and 38 percent reported binge drinking (five or more drinks within two hours).

The threat of gun thefts also is of great concern. A recent survey jointly conducted by Northeastern University and the Harvard School of Public Health found that about 400,000 guns are stolen annually in the U.S. Most of these weapons stay in criminals' hands. A 2016 study by the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health determined that in violent crimes where guns were recovered, the perpetrator carried a gun owned by someone else 8 out of 10 times.

We also reject the rationale that 18-year-old civilians should be allowed to carry firearms because we send young people into combat at that age. Substantially more weapons training and proficiency are required of military personnel than the state ever will demand of civilian gun carriers. Furthermore, soldiers live in an environment of rigorous structure and strong discipline unlike any state campus. And they are not allowed to carry concealed weapons on U.S. military bases.

As for the reciprocity portion of the law, it is of little practical concern or effect because Kansas has one of the least restrictive concealed carry laws in the nation. On philosophical grounds, however, it is troubling that our state would statutorily declare its willingness to allow another state's laws on any topic to have dominance over its own. State governments should and must have the authority to decide for themselves which laws are best suited to protect their own people's interests and safety.

In summation, we urge that any perceived benefit of a lowered concealed age be measured against the clear and present dangers the change poses. If assessed in that manner the inescapable conclusion can only be to maintain the current limit.