



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Commission on Children



Testimony of Steven Hernández
Director of Public Policy and Research
Connecticut Commission on Children

Children Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
Tuesday, February 26, 2013

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and Honorable Members of the Children Committee,

My name is Steven Hernández, and I am the Attorney for the Legislature's Commission on Children.

I am here this morning to provide the Commission's testimony

- S.B. 328; An Act Concerning Minors And Violent Point-And-Shoot Video Games;
- S.B. 654; An Act Creating A Mental Health First Aid Program For Parents;
- H.B. 6330; An Act Concerning Look-A-Like Firearms; and
- H.B. 6465; An Act Concerning Animal Therapy.

S.B. 328; An Act Concerning Minors And Violent Point-And-Shoot Video Games

The Commission supports the establishment of a Violent Video Game Task Force within the Department of Children and Families to study the effects of violent video games on youth behavior.

We are honored that you would have a designee by the Commission on the Task Force to express the voice of children and youth.

There is a robust debate reoccurring in this country after the facts of Newtown emerged about the effects of violent video games on children, particularly violent first-person shooter games.

We do know that children are spending increasing amounts of time playing these games: boys averaging 13 hours a week; girls five hours.

There have been interesting analyses about the role of gaming in escapism or dissociation. At the same time, soldiers returning from the fields of war are accessing therapies that include first-

person scenarios to replay, and hopefully repair, through the experience of war from a safe distance.

The International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation notes that while there are instances of normal dissociation, which do not interfere with the child's development and social and academic progress, there are types of problematic dissociation, which "can occur when a child has to cope with an overwhelming or frightening event, with multiple frightening events, or with a confusing living situation."

In those cases, violent video games could provide a type of escapism which may keep the child from developing normally and forming healthy attachments.

The Commission looks forward to exploring these important issues further.

H.B. 6465: An Act Concerning Animal Therapy.

The Commission supports HB6465. The Commission worked in Newtown from the early morning after the shooting until the town had created its infrastructure for support and healing. We built, with our national partner Save the Children, a play and art station in John Reed Middle School. Therapy dogs were on our team every day.

The play station was a partnership between community mental health, family strengthening and disaster management. It became the transition room where some children lingered before seeing a counselor. Others stayed while their parents sought crisis help. Games were invented. Group discussion emerged on death, mourning, and how to recover. Over 400 children and their parents found solace and support at the play station.

At all times, one or two well-trained therapy dogs sat with the children. They knew to patiently let children play, touch, hold, and hang on to them. For some, particularly the children who had difficulty using their words, the dogs were the species the student's needed to reach out. In truth, some children needed to rest against a species other than humans, after what they had witnessed.

Children heard their principal die. Some witnessed their friends and teachers die. Others walked past those who did not survive themselves. Many hid, not knowing what would come.

Our team included teachers and first responder, and therapy dogs were a part of that team. They were a constant source of care, comfort and innocence. The dogs welcomed the children and sat with them. Their touch and sensitivity made what was almost unbearable, bearable.

Some dogs did tricks, others pawed for your hand. Some talked; others turned on their backs and asked to be touched by those who had gone so deep inside it seemed they might not return.

Well trained therapy dogs and other animals follow a culture of work, spirit and nurturance. They bring what, at times, humans cannot, while partnering with a human team. When children talked about the devil taking over the town, the dogs did tricks, turned in circles, asked for hugs and brought light and love back to the forefront.

H.B. 6330; An Act Concerning Look-A-Like Firearms

The Commission Supports H.B 6330. According to the Anti-violence campaign of the International Health & Epidemiology Research Center, “toy weapons are increasingly being used to commit real crimes, and more children are being killed when a toy gun is mistaken for a real gun, or a real gun for a toy.”

We have appended a litany of examples where toys mistaken for real weapons, or altered to look like real weapons, have led to the death of innocent children, assaults and robberies of innocent people, and the unfortunate use of force by law enforcement because the gun “looked real.”

A police officer who arrested a 13 year-old who tried to rob a restaurant in Mt, Vernon, NY with what looked like a 38-calibre handgun said he was worried that these kids can get shot for nothing.

Specific markings on toy weapons are meant to protect children. To that end, we ask that you consider the usual protections for children who commit crimes, such as opportunities for diversion or intervention, so that this bill can be a tool for preserving life and promoting education.

S.B. 654; An Act Creating A Mental Health First Aid Program For Parents

Regarding Committee Bill No. 654, the goals of establishing a comprehensive mental health first aid program for parents is laudable, particularly ensuring parent information, access and resources; and linking the proposed program to measurable results.

The Commission on Children recommends further research into mental health programs and policies to reach parents and assist with early intervention, prevention and outreach.

Well trained pediatricians in mental health, school social workers, a system of proven home visitation programs and improved coordination between school and community programs in mental health, are strategies that might offer more profound family connection, and more sustainable interventions with less cost and more certain outcomes.

The Commission on Children is working with a network of mental health practitioners to offer up best practices and a framework for the mental health response. This will be completed next week and will be immediately forwarded to you.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



**ANTI-VIOLENCE CAMPAIGN International Health & Epidemiology Research
Center**

FACT SHEET ABOUT TOY GUNS

Toy weapons are increasingly being used to commit real crimes, and more children are being killed when a toy gun is mistaken for a real gun, or a real gun for a toy. Consider the following alarming facts about toy guns, crimes, and children/youth being killed:

1. On May 5, 2008, in Southaven, Mississippi, five elementary school students were suspended for bringing two realistic looking toy guns (pellet guns) to school. The toy guns' orange safety tips were painted black.
2. On February 6, 2008, in Okaloosa County, Florida, the Niceville Police Department responded to a drive-by BB gun shooting which caused injury to the eye of a young innocent bystander.
3. On January 6, 2008, in Belleville, Illinois, a 39-year-old man was shot by police when the man pulled out a gray toy pistol, which looked real, from his waistband.
4. On October 26, 2007, in San Diego, California, a gun scare caused the lockdown at Juan Diego School. The gun turned out to be a toy gun (Air soft replica of Berretta 92).
5. On October 5, 2007, in Bakersfield, California, a 49-year-old man, Frank Ramos Sr. was fatally shot and killed by two Bakersfield police officers because he was holding a gun while standing in the street. The gun turned out to be an imitation toy firearm.

6. On June 22, 2007, in West Memphis, Arkansas, a 12-year-old boy, De Aunta Farrow, was shot and killed by a Memphis police officer because he was holding a toy gun in his hand, and the police officer said it looked real.

7. On April 8, 2007, in Mount Vernon, New York, a 13-year-old boy was arrested by the police when he tried to rob a Chinese restaurant, with what police said was something that looked like a 38-caliber hand gun. The gun turned out to be a plastic Airsoft toy gun. The police officer said he was worried that these kids can get shot for nothing.

8. On March 29, 2007, in Salt Lake City, Utah, four teenagers were arrested by a West Valley Police Officer, for a drive-by shooting, with a toy gun.

9. On March 22, 2007, in Little Rock, Arkansas, a 12-year-old boy was shot and killed by a police officer. The child's silver toy gun was mistaken by the police for a real handgun.

10. On February 24, 2007, in Brooklyn, New York, Sean "Light" Anderson, a 27-year-old, caused a real gun fight, when getting into a car with what appeared to be an AK-47 machine gun. The cops fired several shots, but miraculously nobody was struck. Turned out, the gun was a fake. A shocked witness said: "[The cops] running and shooting down the block where there could have been innocent bystanders."

11. In February 2007, in New Jersey, a teenager robbed a man for his Cocker Spaniel with an Airsoft gun, which looked like a .45-caliber handgun. Police are concerned about mistaking the toy gun for the real gun, and these could result in tragedies.

12. On February 12, 2007, in San Diego, California, Noe Rojas, a 17-year-old teenager, was shot and killed, by an 11 year veteran police officer, for having a toy gun, which resembled a .38 caliber revolver, during a traffic stop.

13. On November 26, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri, police shot and wounded a 13-year-old boy in the hip, leg, and arm because officers said that the boy

reached into his waist band, and pointed a toy revolver, which looked authentic, at them.

14. On November 24, 2006, in Miami, Florida, Jose Varela, a 50-year-old freelance cartoonist, caused an at least two hour standoff at the Miami Harold's Tribune building for carrying and pointing a realistic looking black plastic toy gun, resembling a semiautomatic weapon at people. He was later arrested, and jailed.

15. On July 25, 2006, in Ontario, California, a 15-year-old boy was shot and wounded when he pulled out and pointed, what appeared to be a .44-caliber magnum handgun, at some people. The gun turned out to be an Airsoft replica toy gun, which shoots rubber or plastic pellets. The toy gun had the orange tip, but the police said that the orange tip was not visible!!

16. On May 1, 2006, in West Valley City, Utah, a 10-year-old boy, a fourth-grade elementary school student, was suspended and booked into a juvenile detention facility for taking a plastic pellet-firing Airsoft pistol to school, and for shooting at least 13 classmates.

17. On March 7, 2006, in Newark, New Jersey, a 32-year-old man was fatally shot by the police officers for brandishing a gun that appeared to be a chrome semi-automatic pistol. The man had a history of mental illness, and the gun turned out to be a toy gun purchased from an ice cream man. This was the first police shooting in Newark in 12 years.

18. On July 7, 2006, in Cleveland, Ohio, a 55-year-old, James Nugent, got shot by a toy BB gun in the lower back by two Ohio State University students/basketball players.

19. On February 20, 2006, a Sargent High School freshman got suspended for bringing a pellet-shooting toy gun into school, and shooting a female student in the leg.

20. On February 11, 2006, in Texas, Round Rock Police Officers had to draw weapons on two different teenagers on two different occasions for carrying toy weapons looking like a 45. Sgt. Ben

Hall of the Round Rock Police Department said, "Had he pulled out a weapon, there is a good chance he would have been shot!" Round Rock police responded to eight fake gun calls within the past few weeks and there have been several toy guns recently confiscated from students who brought them to school.

a. Round Rock Police are warning central Texans about dangerous trends they are seeing when it comes to toy guns. "Many times, you can't tell which gun is real, and which one is a toy. Toy guns can be fatal attractions", the local news sited. (Feb. 15-2006).

21. On February 4, 2006, in Salinas, California, a freshman at North Salinas High School, was arrested and suspended indefinitely, for bringing a realistic looking toy gun, resembling a 9 mm, to school.

22. On January 19, 2006, in Valley Glen, California, a fourth-grader was shot in the chest while at recess at Kittredge Street Elementary School, by a plastic pellet fired by an Airsoft pistol, shot by a 16-year old in an apartment across from school.

23. On January 13, 2006, in Longwood, Florida, a 15-year-old, Christopher Penley, who was an eighth grader, was shot and killed by police officers for brandishing a pellet gun that closely resembled to a 9 mm at Milwee Middle School. The pellet toy gun had been painted to appear to be a real firearm.

24. On December 25, 2005, in Los Angeles, California, a police officer shot a 43- year-old woman, Robin Hutching, and wounded her in the thigh, because she pointed a replica handgun at him.

25. On February 8, 2005, in Olympia, Washington (Thurston County), Daniel Cootsa accidentally shot his 19-year-old friend, David Nelson, in the head, mistaking it for a replica pellet gun. The bullet passed through his skull. Although he survived, he lost sight in one eye, and hearing in one ear, among other serious injuries. The gun was given to their friend's sister for protection! Daniel was sentenced and jailed later.

26. In February of 2004, a 14-year-old boy in Lakewood, California, was shot and wounded after Sheriff's Deputies mistakenly thought an Airsoft pellet handgun in the boy's waistband was real.

27. On January 2, 2003, in Brooklyn, New York, police shot and killed a 17-year-old, Allen Newsome, after he pulled a pellet gun on a detective dressed as a delivery man.

28. On October 4, 2002, in Carson, California, a sheriff's deputy shot and wounded a man who had a toy gun that looked real, even though the toy gun had an orange tip, according to a witness.

29. On August 19, 2002, in New Haven, Connecticut, Edgar Ayala, a 9-year-old boy, was shot and killed by his 10-year-old friend, with a .38-caliber revolver, and a .40-caliber Smith and Wesson, belonging to his 26-year-old stepfather. The boy said he thought the gun was a fake gun. His mother said that after the shooting, his son burst into the bedroom yelling, "Mommy, I didn't mean it" and "I thought it was fake, Mommy, I am sorry," over and over again.

30. In August 2002, in Brooklyn, New York, a man was fatally shot by a police officer, for wielding something which turned out to be a toy hand gun.

31. In 2002, in New Jersey, 14-year-old twin girls held up and robbed a bank, with an air pellet toy gun.

32. In 2002, in Whitmore Lake, Michigan, Tommy Davis, a 7-year-old boy, faced three counts of felony assault charges for pointing a toy gun at three other youngsters and threatening to shoot them.

33. On March 13, 2002, a BB gun shooting at Slidell Junior High School caused five students, ages 13 and 14, to be shot and injured, and two teenage shooters to be booked.

34. On May 31, 2001, in Georgia, a man was almost shot by North Augusta Police Officers, for pointing a toy pellet gun at motorists from his car. He was arrested and jailed later.

35. On May 5, 2001, in Huntington Beach, California, an 18-year-old, Antonio Salvidar, was shot and killed by a police officer, while the police mistook his toy rifle for a real gun.

36. On November 20, 2000, in Charlotte, North Carolina, the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport had to shut down flight operation for two hours when the scanner spotted a gun which turned out to be a young boy's metal toy gun. More than 100 flights were delayed and many missed their connections for the Thanksgiving holidays.

37. On November 6, 2000, in Portland, Oregon, a 3-year-old boy shot his 25-year old father, Jonathan Davis Christian, when he mistook his father's loaded .38-caliber revolver for a toy gun. His father left it on the kitchen table just for a few seconds while he went to go get the key to lock the gun's trigger.

38. On October 28, 2000, a Los Angeles Police Officer, responding to a loud Halloween costume party at a mansion in Beverly Hills, California, shot and killed 39-year old Anthony Dwain Lee ("Liar, Liar," "ER," and "NYPD Blue"). Lee was inside enjoying the party when he was killed. The officer that shot him thought he had a .357 magnum semi-automatic, when in fact it was a rubber toy gun.

39. On May 4, 2000, Santa Rosa police shot and killed a 37-year-old, Eugene Dieterle, in Santa Rosa Junior College when he pointed a black handgun, which turned out to be a plastic toy gun, painted in black.

40. On April 10, 2000, in Sonoma County, California, Sheriff Deputies fatally shot 31-year-old, Erin MacDonald, at his home. Sheriff Deputies said that he was wielding a gun, which turned out to be a fake toy gun!!

41. On March 31, 2000, in Brooklyn, New York, two teenagers, 19-year-old Tysheen Bourne, and 17-year-old Andre Fields, were fatally shot by two undercover Narcotics detectives while brandishing toy handguns.

42. On November 10, 1999, in Monterey Park, California, a 13-year-old boy was shot twice on his

upper left arm by an undercover cop because the boy had a toy gun resembling a real gun.

43. On April 13, 1999, in Hartford, Connecticut, Aquan Salmon, a 14-year-old boy was fatally shot to death by a Hartford Police Officer, in which the police claimed the boy was reaching for a weapon. No gun was found, but the police said they found two gun-shaped cigarette lighters.

44. On September 6, 1998, in Fort Myers, Florida, a 12-year-old boy, Ronald L. Harris, was arrested for pointing a toy gun at a man while demanding money.

45. On August 23, 1998, Michael Jones, a 16-year old boy, was shot 17 times and critically wounded by two police officers in Brooklyn, New York while riding a bicycle because he had a water gun that looked like a 9mm MP5 submachine gun.

46. In August of 1998, an entire terminal of the Los Angeles International Airport was evacuated when a toy gun was mistaken for a real gun. Many flights were affected, and many passengers were delayed.

47. On August 6, 1998, in Pacoima, California, 23-year old Issac Alvarez was killed by his own gun when a 4-year old neighbor picked up the loaded rifle hidden under a bed and shot him in the back of his head. Police said the boy had stated that he thought it was a toy gun. Police said, "Toy rifles are out there. They play with toy rifles all the time. They are just like real guns."

48. On June 1, 1998, in Gardena, California, a 9-year old girl found a loaded handgun mounted underneath a desk in a woman's office. While playing with it, she shot and killed her 6-year old sister when she aimed it at her chest. She said she believed "it was a toy." The two sisters were brought to the business by their mother's boyfriend, who works there.

49. On April 3, 1998, a third grade boy took and displayed a small loaded antique 70-year-old real gun at Queen's Elementary School. The Principal delayed notifying the police because he thought it was a toy gun, and did not think it could have

created a real disaster.

50. On January 9, 1998, in Troy, Michigan (suburb of Detroit), police arrested a cross-dressing bank robber who pointed, what looked like, a handgun at the bank teller. It turned out that the gun actually was a toy. He is the probable suspect linked to at least a dozen bank heists in the area.

51. On January 8, 1998 in Spokane, Washington, Lisa D., a 23-year-old woman, was arrested for robbing five banks for \$5,500, with a toy gun.

52. On December 26, 1997, a father and his two sons, ages twelve and fourteen, were shot several times and injured by their neighbor, while the two brothers were playing in their backyard with the paint ball gun that the younger brother had received as a Christmas present the day before.

53. Another tragedy involving toy guns also occurred on November 5, 1997, when an explosion of a machine wrapping popping caps for toy guns and play hand grenades claimed the life of four innocent female workers (Juana Martinez Gonzalez, 33, Maria Valenzuela, 39, Gloria Jaramilo, 26) at the Imperial Toy Factory in Downtown Los Angeles. The explosion also injured about two dozen others and several were hospitalized.

54. Air guns are considered toys, but they have caused injuries and deaths, especially in boys 10 to 14 years old. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle, University of Cincinnati School of Medicine, Cincinnati, and Children's Mercy Hospital, Kansas City, Missouri (published in "Pediatrics," the Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Oct. 1997) reported that of 101 children hospitalized for air gun injuries, three died, fifteen were blinded permanently, twenty five suffered permanent visual loss, and half of those 101 needed surgery.

55. On June 21, 1997, an entire terminal at Los Angeles International Airport was evacuated, grounding at least 15 flights, when a cigarette lighter, shaped like a pistol, was mistaken for a real gun.

56. On March 1, 1997, a 6-year-old boy's toy gun caused the evacuation of the San Jose International Airport, in California. More than 20 flights were affected.

57. On January 31, 1997, in Long Island, New York, Laurie Leitner, a 26-year-old woman, was shot in the chest and killed by a West Islip Police Officer because the police officer thought the gun that Laurie carried was real; but it turned out to be a toy.

58. In December 1995, police almost shot at a 10-year-old boy hiding in the bushes pointing a gun at them. The gun turned out to be a toy.

59. On November 4, 1995, in National City (South of San Diego), California, Johnny Angel Navarrete, an 18-year-old boy, was shot in front of his house after an argument with several youths. When he pulled a replica gun (a cigarette lighter) from his waistband that looked like a real gun, another youth pulled out his real gun, and shot him thinking the lighter was genuine. Johnny died two days later.

60. On Memorial Day, May 29, 1995, in Carson Park, California, Freddy Palacio, a 12-year-old, was shot twice by a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy who mistook the \$2 toy gun for a .22 caliber pistol.

61. On Sunday, April 2, 1995, in the City of Torrance, California, 18-year-old Santiago Lopez Garcia was shot to death by the police because he had a cigarette lighter, which resembled a gun in his hand. (Ironically, this was the same day that we were collecting the toy guns, and educating the children about the danger of toy guns and real guns, in a park, only a few miles away).

62. On April 3, 1995, police almost shot at Robert Alvarez, a 28-year-old man, in East L.A., California, because he had a lighter in the shape of a semiautomatic pistol. He was arrested and charged with suspected brandishing of a firearm "on a public thoroughfare."

63. In October of 1994, Nicholas Heyward Jr., a 13-year-old boy and straight-A student of Brooklyn, NY, was shot in the chest and killed by a

police officer when he was playing with his toy gun.

64. Jamiel Johnson, a 16-year old boy, was shot and wounded on the same day, and in the same city as above, for the same reason.

65. In Montgomery, Alabama, a 7-year-old boy was shot by his own 9-year-old brother while playing with the gun they found in the glove compartment of their dad's car. The boy died, even though this happened in a hospital parking lot.

66. In 1994, toy guns were reportedly used in 329 felonies in New York alone.

67. In 1993, in Las Vegas, Nevada, a 3-year-old girl found her father's loaded revolver. Thinking it was a toy, she aimed, shot, and killed her pregnant mother who was asleep on the sofa. The mother died on the way to the hospital.

68. In 1991, a 3-year-old boy, in Northern California, was shot and killed by his grandfather while playing, mistakenly using his real gun, instead of his grandson's toy gun.

69. In 1990, according to statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Justice, between January 1985 and September 1989, police departments nationwide reported confiscating 31,650 imitation guns during crime-related incidences.

70. Statistics from U.S. Bureau of Justice also show that in 1987, over 1400 toy guns were used in crimes in New York City alone. This is a sharp increase (80%) from four years earlier.

71. In 1987, Leonard Falcon, a 19-year-old boy from Rancho Cucamonga, California, was shot and killed by a San Bernardino County Sheriff's Deputy, while playing with a laser tag gun, which resembled a real gun.

72. In 1987, a 12-year-old boy was shot and killed by a police officer in San Francisco, California. His toy gun was mistaken for real gun.

73. In 1983, a 5-year-old boy was shot and killed at his home, by an Orange County Police Officer

because he was holding a toy gun.

74. Studies show that most children younger than eight can not reliably distinguish a toy gun from a real gun.

Police Photos: Which One is A Toy?

Dr. Farideh Kioumehrdadsetan
The International Health & Epidemiology Research
Center
Anti-Violence Campaign (Peace Campaign)
Email: iherc@hotmail.com
Website: <http://www.irol.com/avc>

Revised June 10, 2008
