Testimony in OPPOSITION to:

Submitted by:
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Honorable Judiciary Committee Chairperson Stafstrom and Judiciary Committee members,

All accidents, by their very nature, are preventable. Those accidents that affect children, particularly those which end fatally, are the hardest to come to grips with. Whenever such tragedies occur, it is not uncommon for proposed legislative bills to come up for discussion whose intent is to prevent such accidents. Yet, only those tragedies involving firearms seem to push lawmakers to raise bills, such as H.B. 7218, that employ the threat of felony charges as a proposed way of prevention.

According to the CDC, far more children die of accidental drowning in this state than die of firearm accidents. Every summer, stories of preventable drownings populate local newspaper headlines. Unattended toddlers, peer-pressured teens. Each story is tragic in its own way. In fact, one can hardly argue that child drowning deaths are any less tragic than child firearm deaths. But, is there any suggestion that we charge an adult with a felony when a Connecticut youth is found at the bottom of a pool? Do we look to incarcerate the grieving neighbor who hosted the backyard party? Do we look to damage someone’s already emotionally fragile psyche by threatening them with jail time for an accident? Do we further destroy a family or community by taking away another child’s father or mother, slap them in cuffs, and haul them off to prison just so we can feel like we did something to combat the problem?

No, of course we don’t. We don’t even have legislation requiring that pools be secured under any penalty of law. Imagine if pools had to be drained, locked, or otherwise made unusable shortly after being used. Wouldn’t this help prevent these tragic drownings? Why is this never suggested? Certainly, there is no valid reasoning for needing a pool at a moment’s notice. There is no valid argument that quick and easy access to a pool for self-defense is necessary. In fact, pools are totally unnecessary; a first-world luxury. There isn’t even a Constitutional Amendment protecting a person’s right to have one. And yet, according to the CDC, we’ve allowed 102 Connecticut children to die from accidental drowning since 2001. This number is far more than die accidentally from firearms. In fact, the CDC shows no one under the age of 19 dying from a firearm accident between 2001 and 2017 (the last year for which the CDC has data), though the Office of the Child Advocate of the State of Connecticut issued a paper in 2013 that showed that two children had in fact died from a firearm accident since 2001. So, fifty times more children die from accidental drowning in Connecticut than from firearms accidents. And yet, here I find myself having to submit testimony decrying a bill that wishes to place punitive measures over my head not because I may own a pool, but because I may own a gun.
The question that this committee needs to ask itself, then, is this: why the discrimination? Yes, this is discrimination, plain and simple. Firearms owners have been described, usually with derision, as part of a “gun culture.” Yes, there is a gun culture in America, and it is a thread that has long run through the fabric and the color of this nation and of this state. But any culture — no matter its form or its origin — that is foreign or grotesque to some have historically been discriminated against. Take Irish culture. It is ironic that we find ourselves days away from celebrating St. Patrick’s Day, a holiday that celebrates distinct aspects of Irish culture. One such aspect, Irish step dancing, came about from the attempted suppression of Irish culture by the English in the 1400s.

Now this cultural bigotry is not something faced only in other nations in long-forgotten times. My Sicilian immigrant ancestors had to fight similar attitudes professed by American Nativists here in this country as recently as the 1900s. My Sicilian immigrant ancestors were considered arcane and primitive; their culture too different to be “acceptable”; a bane to “true American” culture. This is much the same way as America’s gun culture is now being portrayed. And, it is this false portrayal of the gun culture which finds itself before you now in this piece of proposed legislation. I am thankful that intelligent thinking overcame the emotionally-laced bigotry my Sicilian immigrant ancestors faced. I hope that intelligence prevails again; counted on to overcome the silent bigotry embodied in this bill, an undeserved bigotry squarely targeting me and all those who share in Connecticut’s gun culture.

Thank you,
Matthew Schmitt