

**Written Testimony of Ernest Willingham**  
**Before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**Hearing on “Protecting America’s Children from Gun Violence”**

**Wednesday, June 15, 2022**

**10:00 a.m.**

Good morning Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and distinguished members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for inviting me to discuss with you how our nation’s youth are in crisis from the persistent gun violence plaguing our country.

My name is Ernest Willingham. I am a rising Junior at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts studying Health Sciences with aspirations of becoming a physician. I have seen gun violence up close. Allow me to take you through a journey of what the average young person goes through in a city struggling with gun violence -- what it is like to make life decisions when fear of gun violence or of being shot weighs heavily on your mind every single day.

I am the youngest of eleven children. My family lived in the Cabrini Green housing project in Chicago until our building was torn down. We were displaced and lived in Lake County, Illinois for a short time until we moved back to the West side of Chicago, where gun violence is raging. I attended Crane Medical Prep High School located on the near West Side of Chicago.

I have seen my brother, my father, my cousin and my best friend become victims of gun violence. My brother was shot while we lived in Cabrini Green on two different occasions within a one-year timespan -- once in the groin and the other time in the leg. I was 5 years old then. I did not have a clear understanding of gun violence, but it did not take a rocket scientist to recognize the emotional trauma. My brother, after being shot the first time, was vigilant yet fearful. Imagine being scared to go out in public or go to family gatherings after being shot, in fear of being shot again.

On the weekend of August 5, 2018, my best friend, Jahnae Patterson, was shot and killed -- at age 17 -- by a stray bullet while hanging outside with friends in Chicago. She was one of 66 people shot and one of 12 people killed in the City on that

summer weekend. Four years later, in 2022, we still have no closure, no resolution, and her family and so many more are left with unspeakable grief, trauma and fear.

I never fully understood the anguish from gun violence until I had to sing and provide comfort to Jahnae's family at the funeral. I was devastated and heartbroken for her family. This is something that young people should never have to prepare themselves for, yet it remains the lived experience of so many children and youth around our nation.

After Jahnae's life was taken from her and I moved through high school, I dealt with this constant interpersonal fear that I would be shot, and because of this, the trajectory of my career and education was on the line. As I approached my senior year, I was the first male in my family to graduate high school (soon to be college), and I knew that college was the answer, but I was too afraid to stay home and possibly be shot and killed. I purposely did not apply to any schools near my home because I was afraid I was going to die from gun violence. I made a vow to myself that I would rather risk losing my life in another part of the country than have my mother learn that someone had taken my life away from me in Chicago. My mother

and I discussed my decision to leave Chicago for college and we both agreed it made sense given the risk.

Growing up in Chicago, it has become the norm to hear that someone, primarily a young person, has been shot and killed; therefore, we cherish every possible accomplishment because we attend more funerals than weddings. Ask any young person in Chicago: how many weddings have they attended? Very few would have attended one; however, most have attended least a dozen funerals. I attended an 8th-grade graduation this past week with kids ranging from 12-14 years of age. As I looked around, I saw parents bawling their eyes out -- not just because they were proud but because they were not burying their children. We know many who have had to bury young people, and those who have not yet lived in constant fear that their children will be next. Our young people, the future of our nation, are dying and suffering in mass numbers.

For the first 18 years of my life, I was fortunate to have been engaged with a vital program of Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago called "Chicago Youth Programs". <https://chicagoyouthprograms.org/>. This program serves youth 0-25, helping them mitigate risks and build strengths via education, comprehensive

health care skill development and career opportunity. It helps youth like me who come from neighborhoods tarnished by poverty. This program altered the course of my life as well as that of a number of my siblings

This summer, I am employed at a school-based health clinic located in a High School on Chicago's South Side. One of my students expressed that she was indecisive about going away for college or staying home due to our country's current gun violence climate. Our young people are faced with decisions to which they cannot find answers. Our youth are terrified, unsafe and pleading with elected officials in Washington to muster the courage to protect them.

Our society, our government, our leaders must protect youth from gun violence. The task is monumental. The statistics on guns and mental health are mind numbing, sobering and alarming:

- Guns are the leading cause of death of Illinois children ages 1-17 years old. 1,310 Illinoisans (all ages) die by gun violence every year. Between 2015 and 2019, an average of 180 children and adolescents in Illinois and 3,231 children and adolescents across the country were killed by guns every year.

- In 2017, young Black males were 13.7 times more likely to die from a firearm-related homicide than non-Black males in Chicago.
- According to the CDC, nearly 1 in 5 children have a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, but only 20% of these children receive care from a specialized mental health care provider.
- Young people have the fastest growing firearm suicide rate of any age group over the last 10 years.
- Nationally, the CDC found that a **quarter of young adults (18-24)** have contemplated suicide during the pandemic.

We have wasted enough time discussing the problem, and now it is time we pass legislation to stop the killing of innocent persons. We are better than this as a country and we can solve this crisis. Gun violence is a multifaceted issue. However, it is the responsibility of the legislative branch of this government to initiate stricter gun laws and uphold a standard of safety for all people across this country. We cannot continue to allow what Jahnae Patterson's mother experienced to become the norm for mothers and fathers across the country.

As another day passes without proper steps being taken, the people, the young people of our nation, are holding the legislative branch accountable for each life that is taken away while we wait. I plead with you to pass common sense gun legislation so children and youth can grow up in safe communities.

Thank you for very much for your time.