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Payne-Sponsored Bill Calling for Mandatory 10-Year Sentence for Possession of Firearm With Intent to Commit Crime Held in Committee

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Senator Steven Payne By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

A bill sponsored by Senator Steven Payne proposing a 10-year minimum sentence for unauthorized possession of a firearm and evidence of intent to commit a crime of violence was held in committee during a Wednesday hearing.

Senators in the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety contended that Bill No. 34-0098 — which calls for those convicted on the offenses to serve a mandatory 10-year minimum sentence without suspension of sentence or adjudication, and without eligibility for probation or parole — is counterproductive because it only relies on severe punishment.

"If we don't find ways to change these young men from thinking that a gun is the only solution out there, sometimes these heavy-hand sanctions do not do that," said Senator Franklin Johnson. He said the proposed legislation would "back up our prison system with lots of people doing lots of time."

Mr. Johnson later pointed to the gun arrests for the years 2019-2021, which V.I.P.D. Commissioner Nominee Ray Martinez said was 316. "Imagine now 316 young men for 10 years in prison. No rehabilitation, no opportunity to change their lives, no way back out on the street to feed their children," he said. "I am not saying that carrying a firearm is right but I am saying to you... we must give the opportunity for them to change their lives and be more productive citizens in this community."

Senator Kenneth Gittens said, "I'm looking at this and I'm seeing that there is no substantial or good evidence showing that mandatory minimum sentencing do anything to make the public safer."

Senator Javan James stated, "We understand the intent," however the main issue with the bill as proposed is the 10-year minimum sentence, which summarized the senators' thoughts on why the measure was held in committee.