



ERIE COUNTY LEGISLATURE

HON. FRANK J. TODARO
8TH DISTRICT LEGISLATOR

February 24, 2026

Hon. Timothy Meyers
Chairman, Erie County Legislature
92 Franklin Street – 4th Floor
Buffalo, New York 14202

RE: A Local Law authorizing hunting license holders who are twelve or thirteen years of age to hunt deer with adult supervision

Dear Chairman Meyers,

This letter is intended to support a Local Law I am clocking in regarding the authorization for youth hunters aged twelve or thirteen years of age to hunt deer in Erie County. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation provides for this via Environmental Conservation Law 11-0935 but requires counties wishing to participate to pass a local law opting-into the program. The New York State Legislature has extended this program through 2028, and Erie County is the only county in Upstate New York that is not opted-into to this program.

This Honorable Body previously approved a version of this law in 2021 that was vetoed by County Executive Poloncarz. Executive Poloncarz cited the “many unfortunate firearm hunting accidents across the state and county, especially those involving youth hunters” as the reason for the law’s veto. However, five years of data disproves these concerns. The DEC has published an annual report detailing results of this program and, in five years, there have been zero hunting related shooting incidents, violations, or license revocations involving twelve- and thirteen-year-old hunters. Additionally, an overwhelming number of youth hunters and their mentors report moderate or great satisfaction with the program. Furthermore, the program has been deemed so successful, that the DEC is recommending the law be made permanent.

While hunting season has concluded for 2025-2026 season, I am respectfully requesting prompt consideration of this law to bring Erie County in line with all other Upstate counties and allow for the cultivation of the next generation of safe and responsible hunters in our community.

Sincerely,

Frank J. Todaro
Erie County Legislator, District 8



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

Deer Hunting by 12- and 13- Year-Old Hunters in 2025

A Report to the New York State Senate and Assembly

February 2026



Owen R., age 12, first time hunter with mom.

12- and 13-Year-Old Deer Hunting Pilot Program Summary

Currently, all states allow youth 12 years old or younger to hunt big game with a firearm. In 2021, New York State enacted legislation that created a new section of the Environmental Conservation Law (ECL) 11-0935 authorizing a license holder who is 12 or 13 years of age to hunt deer with a crossbow, rifle, shotgun, or muzzleloading firearm under the supervision of an experienced adult mentor in eligible counties.

The legislation established this opportunity as a pilot program and required counties to adopt a local law authorizing participation and to notify the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) of such participation. Legislation enacted in 2025 extended this pilot program through 2028.

Of New York's 54 eligible counties, 52 participated during the first five years of the pilot program. Over this time, DEC documented no hunting-related shooting incidents (HRSIs), violations, or hunting license revocations involving 12- and 13-year-old deer hunters. Further, the pilot program has increased overall Conservation Fund resources through license sales revenue and provided DEC an additional tool to advance deer management objectives. DEC continues to document high levels of participation in and satisfaction with the pilot program through post-season surveys of eligible hunters and their mentors (Table 1, Figure 1). Five hundred and eighteen 12- and 13-year-old hunters and their mentors responded to DEC's 2025 post-season survey to evaluate the fifth year of the pilot program.

DEC is pleased to provide the following report to the Legislature highlighting the success of the first four years of the pilot program, as well as recommendations to make the program permanent. This report fulfills the requirement of ECL 11-0935(3), which states, "The department shall prepare a report by February first of each year including the following information at a minimum: number of violations; hunting related incidents and revocations pursuant to section 11-0719; the number of counties participating; the number of minors participating; and the number of deer taken."



Parker L., age 13, deer hunting with his father, Eric L., in WMU 4W.

Preliminary Results from 2025-26 Deer Hunting Seasons

Table 1. Pilot program summary statistics. Estimated participation based on a post-season survey of 12- and 13-year-old licensed hunters and their adult mentors.

Big Game Hunting Season		2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
# Licensed 12- and 13-Year-Old Hunters ¹		12,992	12,745	12,717	12,163	12,632
Estimated Participation by Season	Regular Firearms Season	85%	85%	79%	76%	66%
	Youth Big Game Hunt	62%	70%	68%	57%	63%
	Muzzleloader Season	21%	16%	18%	12%	16%
	Holiday Hunt	26%	18%	18%	16%	13%
	Bowhunting Season	31%	25%	17%	14%	22%
	Crossbow During any Season	18%	22%	12%	11%	12%
# Deer Harvest Reports ²		1,564	1,824	1,487	2,083	2,398
# Hunting-Related Shooting Incidents (HRSIs), violations, & license revocations		0	0	0	0	0
Hunting License Sales		\$252,915	\$206,095	\$246,880	\$206,415	\$206,920

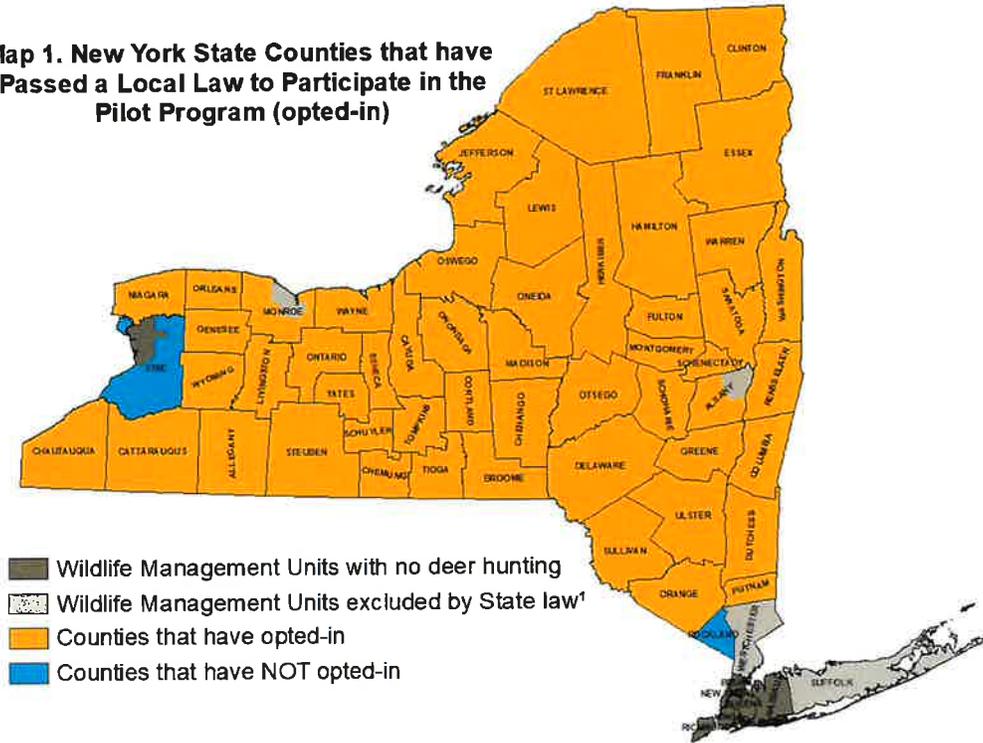
¹ License holders 12 or 13 years old at any time during the hunting season when 12- and 13-year-old hunters could use a firearm or crossbow.

² Only includes deer harvest reports. Without information on reporting rate these values operate as an index but may not accurately represent harvest trends through time. All deer harvest reports and reporting rate information for the 2025-26 hunting season were not available at the time of this report, as deer hunting seasons continued in portions of New York State until January 31. Final deer harvest estimates from the 2025-26 hunting season will be available in DEC's 2025 white-tailed deer harvest summary report.

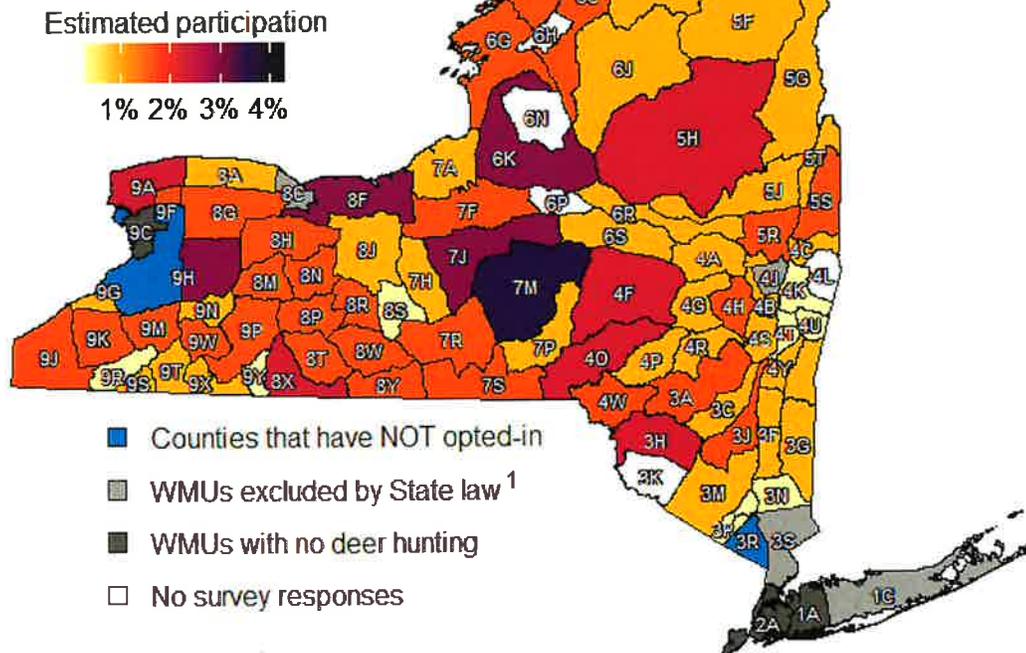
Participation in Eligible Counties and Wildlife Management Units

ECL 11-0935(2) defines eligible areas as: "a county that has passed a local law authorizing participation in the pilot program and has notified the department of such participation, however, that the following counties: Westchester; Richmond; Bronx; New York; Kings; Queens; Nassau; and Suffolk shall not be deemed to be eligible." Thus, 54 of 62 New York counties were eligible to participate in the pilot program. Of the 54 eligible counties, only Erie and Rockland counties did not pass a local law allowing 12- and 13-year-old hunters to participate in the pilot program (Map 1). Surveyed 12- and 13-year-old hunters went deer hunting with a firearm or crossbow in 79 Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) across the state with the highest estimated participation in WMUs 7M, 7F, 8F, and 6K (Map 2).

Map 1. New York State Counties that have Passed a Local Law to Participate in the Pilot Program (opted-in)



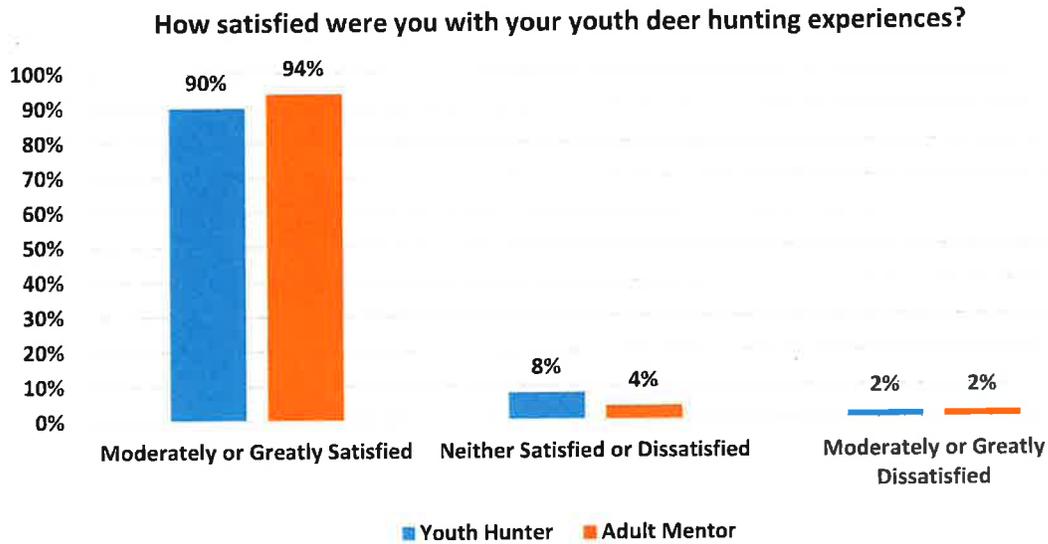
Map 2. Distribution of 12- and 13-Year-Old Deer Hunting Participation by Wildlife Management Unit (WMU)



¹ WMUs 1C, 3S, 4J, and 8C were excluded from the pilot program by state laws (ECL 11-0907(5)(a) and 11-0907(7)(b)) that restrict deer hunting in those areas to use of bows only.

12- and 13-Year-Old Hunter/Mentor Testimonials and Satisfaction

Similar to previous years, 90 percent of 12- and 13-year-old hunters and 94 percent of their adult mentors were moderately or greatly satisfied with their youth deer hunting experience (Figure 1). Testimonials provided by participating 12- and 13-year-old hunters and their mentors demonstrate the great value they see in the pilot program and desire for it to continue permanently.



Testimonials from 12- and 13-Year-Old Hunters and Mentors on the 2025-26 Deer Seasons

"The youth hunting opportunities are great for family bonding and passing on traditions to the next generation at an earlier age." – **Mentor of Rylan R., Age 12, Broome County**

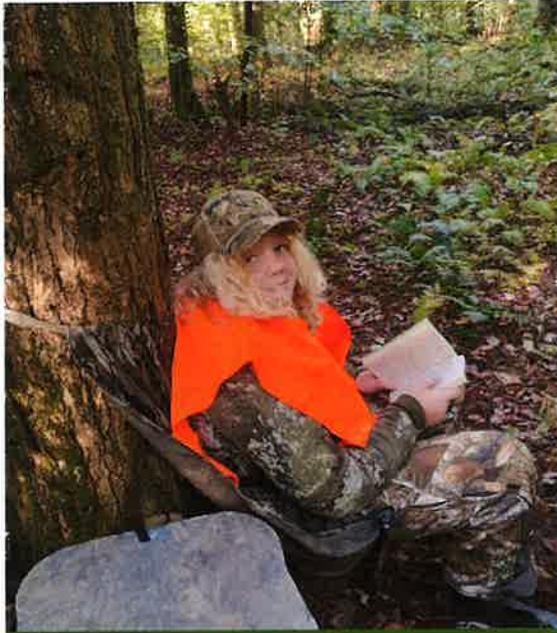
"I applaud the state for allowing the 12–13-year-olds to hunt. The time I share with my daughter disconnected from the world and in the outdoors is priceless and something I deeply cherish. Thank you!" - **Mentor of Avery P., Age 13**

"Great opportunity to get young hunters outdoors and learn to hunt safely with a mentor!" - **Mentor of Tucker L., Age 12**

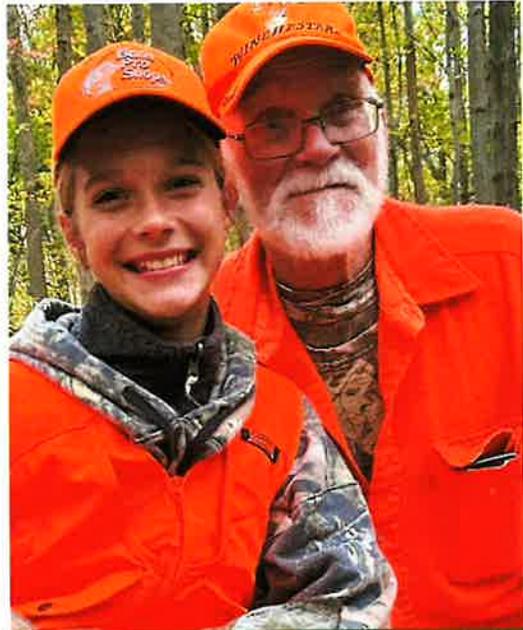
"We appreciate the opportunity to hunt. In my opinion it should be legal to hunt in an elevated blind, instead of only being on the ground. It is a safer shot because the projectile is angled toward the ground." - **Mentor of Allison S., Age 12, Livingston County**

"Thanks for allowing the youth seasons. It's great to be able to take kids out and get them interested in the outdoors before they are too old and get too busy with other activities. I used to have to take the kids to other states, which have younger age limits, to hunt. It's nice to be able to do it at home." - **Mentor of John H., Age 13, Onondaga County**

12- and 13-year-old Deer Hunter Photo Submissions



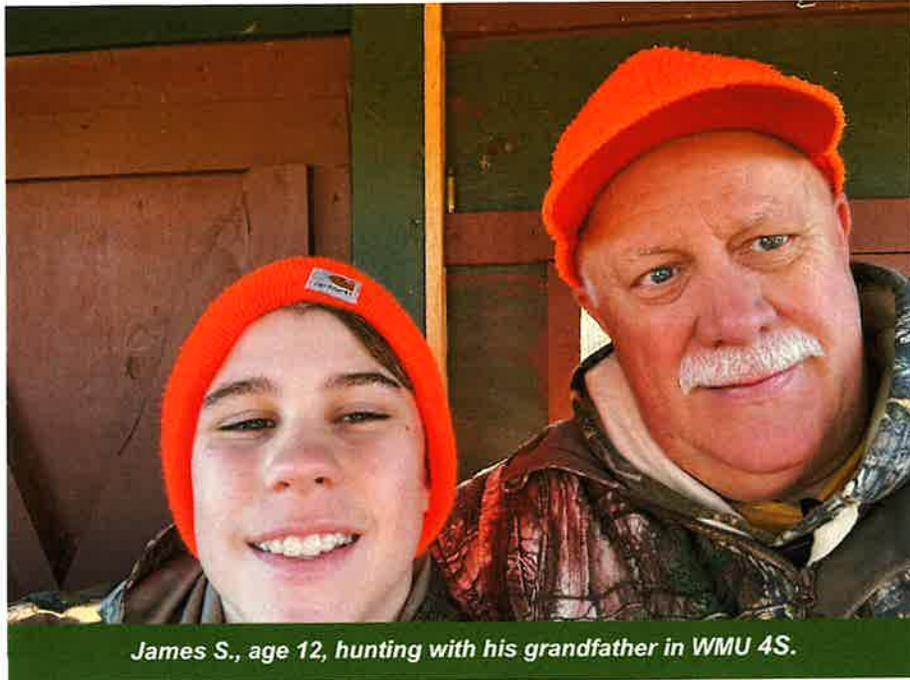
Madison V., age 12, deer hunting in WMU 7M. Photo taken by Dan V.



Kaylee S., age 13, deer hunting with her grandfather, in WMU 9F.



Ryan D., age 13, with his father Mike and grandfather Charles, after a successful youth weekend antlerless deer harvest in WMU 5S.



James S., age 12, hunting with his grandfather in WMU 4S.



Violet E., age 13, with a buck she harvested while hunting with her father, Mike, in WMU 8M.

Recommendations

Over the first five years of the pilot program, 12- and 13-year-old hunters and their mentors have proven they can safely and successfully hunt deer with a firearm or crossbow. To cultivate the next generation of safe and responsible hunters and capitalize on this program's success, DEC provides the following recommendations:

1. **Make permanent the authorization for 12- and 13-year-old hunters to hunt deer with a firearm and crossbow.** Existing state law allows 12- and 13-year-old hunters to hunt small game with a firearm or longbow and big game with a longbow when properly supervised. Establishing the same permanent provisions for 12- and 13-year-old hunters to hunt big game with a firearm would make New York State consistent with other states that currently allow youth 12 years old or younger to hunt big game with a firearm. Further, many 12- and 13-year-old hunters lack the physical strength to pull back a longbow. Allowing 12- and 13-year-old hunters to use a crossbow would help ensure they are able to participate during New York's bowhunting seasons.
2. **Extend the authorization for 12- and 13-year-old hunters to hunt deer with a firearm or crossbow to all of New York State (subject to other provisions of ECL) and remove the requirement for counties to pass a local law opting into the program.** Throughout New York State, hunters aged 14 years or older can hunt deer and bear with firearms and crossbows. An annual county opt-in program for 12- and 13-year-old hunters creates a potential patchwork of regulations and hunting opportunities and additional work for county legislatures, increases the likelihood for confusion among participating hunters and mentors, and cedes DEC's regulatory authority to manage hunting seasons.
3. **Allow 12- and 13-year-old hunters to hunt black bear with a firearm and crossbow.** Twelve- and 13-year-old hunters have been legally able to hunt black bears with a longbow in New York since 2011 and have done so successfully and without safety incidents. Hunting black bear with a longbow is unquestionably more challenging than hunting black bear with a firearm. Therefore, 12- and 13-year-old hunters should be given the opportunity to hunt black bear with firearms and crossbows.
4. **Allow 12- and 13-year-old hunters to hunt big game with a firearm from an elevated position.** Twelve- and 13-year-old big game hunters are currently able to hunt with longbows from elevated positions but are prohibited from using an elevated tree stand or elevated blind when hunting with a firearm. This reduces sight distances, which limits opportunities to see and harvest animals and restricts shot opportunities that might otherwise be safely taken using the ground as a backstop. Hunting from an elevated position is safe when hunters follow appropriate [safety precautions](#). Two-person ladder stands and elevated blinds provide easily accessible, safe shooting platforms for 12- and 13-year-old hunters and their mentors.