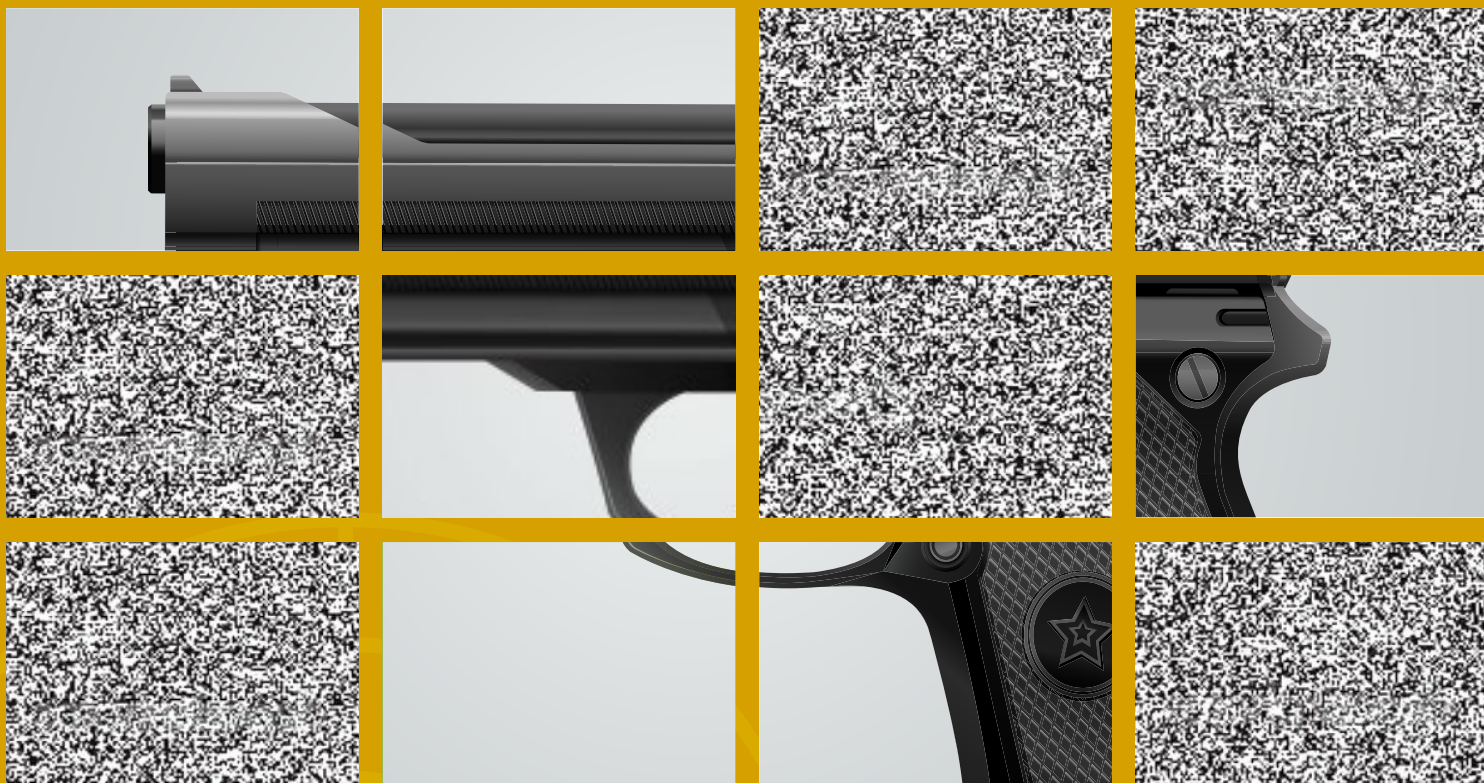


USC Annenberg

*Norman Lear Center
Hollywood, Health
and Society*



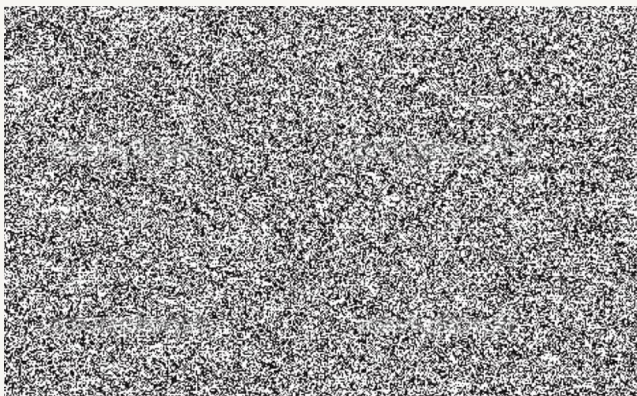
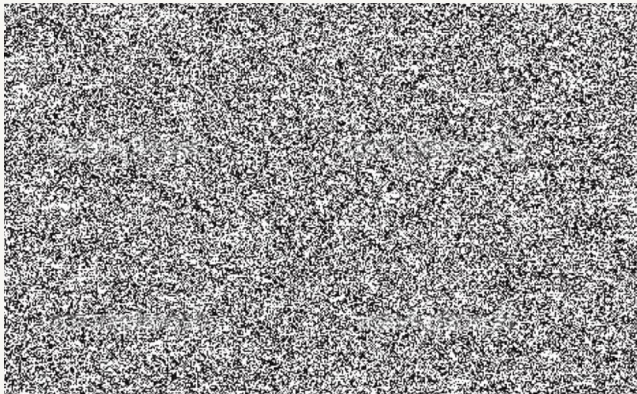
TRIGGER WARNING

Gun Guidelines for the Media



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America has more guns than people; more homicides, suicides, and unintentional deaths by firearm than any of its high-income peer countries by orders of magnitude. The number one cause of death for children and teens in America is gun violence.

So it makes sense that guns seem to be everywhere in our media, too. From late night news to Saturday morning cartoons, cop shows to comedies — guns are ubiquitous on our screens. But film and television have the power to shape public perception, normalize habits, and even effect policy, which is why the way we talk about and depict guns and gun violence matters so much.

The data on the following pages represent a snapshot in time of trends over the past 20 years, as well as a warning of where those trends are headed without conscientious action. As a storyteller, you are in a unique position to change the narrative, reset the bar, and provide representation of safe, acceptable behavior when it comes to firearms. Your voice and talents are needed now more than ever.

Your stories matter.

REAL WORLD STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

- There are **111 gun-related deaths** per day and over 40,000 per year. [LINK](#)
- Every day **321 people are shot** in the United States. [LINK](#)
- The **48,830 total gun deaths in 2021** were by far the most on record, representing an 8% increase from the year before, a 23% increase from five years earlier, and a 45% increase from a decade prior. [LINK](#)
- The **20,958 gun murders** that took place in 2021 were the most since at least 1968, exceeding the previous peak of 18,253 recorded by the CDC in 1993. [LINK](#)
- The **26,328 gun suicides** that took place in 2021 were the most in any year. [LINK](#)
- Gun violence is estimated to cost the American economy at least **\$557 BILLION every year**. [LINK](#)

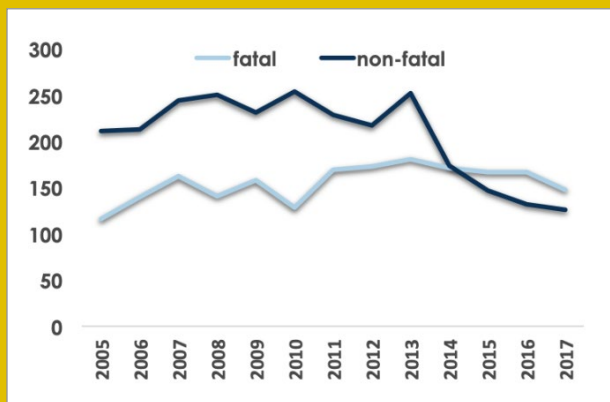
CHILDREN

- Firearms are the **#1 cause of death** for children and teens. [LINK](#)
- **2,571 children died** from firearms in 2021 alone. [LINK](#)
- **85% of children** under 13 who are victims of gun homicide die in their home. [LINK](#)
- An estimated **30 million children in the US live in households with firearms**, and 4.6 million live in a home with at least one loaded and unlocked gun. [LINK](#)
- More than **352,000 students have experienced gun violence** at school since Columbine. [LINK](#)

OFFICER-INVOLVED SHOOTINGS

Black Americans account for less than 13% of the US population but are killed by police at more than twice the rate of White Americans. [LINK](#)

- Over **1,100 people are killed** by police every year. That number has not changed since the *Washington Post* started recording police homicides in 2015. [LINK](#)
- A Black unarmed person is just as likely to be shot by police as a white person who is armed. [LINK](#)
- Unarmed Black civilians are **5x as likely** to be shot by police as unarmed white civilians. [LINK](#)
- White cops discharge their guns several times as often as Black cops when sent to 911 calls in heavily Black neighborhoods. [LINK](#)
- **Police violence means people stop calling 911 in cases of emergency.** This is called THE JUDE EFFECT after Frank Jude was brutally assaulted by police in 2004 in Milwaukee. Even as homicide rates in the city rose, the city received 22,000 fewer 911 calls; the decline was most pronounced in black and brown neighborhoods most in need of protection and assistance. [LINK](#)



Officer-involved shootings — National Police Foundation. [LINK](#)

In 2019, a study by National Police Foundation looked at 1,006 police shootings at 47 departments between 2015 and 2017. Over that 2 year span, they found that 4 out of 5 officers responsible for discharging their firearms had never done so before. [LINK](#)

- Within those shootings, there are officers who seem to be involved in multiple **fatal shootings without consequence.** [LINK](#)
- Some departments, like the PD in Columbus, Ohio, employ an outsized number of **officers involved in multiple shootings.** [LINK](#)

✘ MYTHS

✘ GUNS MAKE US SAFER

American citizens own **FOUR TIMES** the amount of guns as the next highly developed country and suffer **FOUR TIMES** the amount of gun homicides. [LINK](#)

If guns made us safer, America would be the safest country in the world.

The US has:

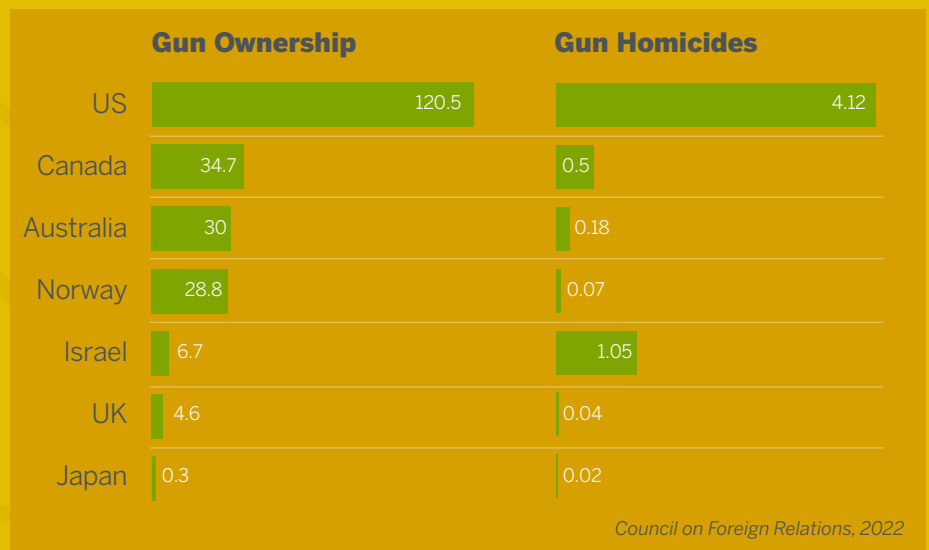
4x

guns & gun homicides



✘ THE GOOD GUY WITH A GUN

“The only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” That’s what we hear when legislators pass lax concealed-carry policies that allow people to carry loaded guns in public. But research shows states that permit concealed-carry have higher rates of gun homicide than states that do not. [LINK](#)



✘ GUN VIOLENCE IS CAUSED BY PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

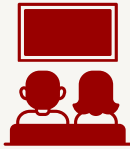
People with diagnosed mental illness are responsible for a scant 3-5% of gun-related deaths. [LINK](#) However, a person with severe mental illness is almost three times more likely to be a victim of violent crime than the general population. [LINK](#) And while mental illness is not unique to the US, our firearm homicide rate is 25 times higher than the other high-income countries combined! [LINK](#)

It’s the guns.

DRAMAS & TROPES

In 2022, the Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project (MIP) partnered with the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund (Everytown) to analyze gun depictions in 250 episodes of popular TV dramas from 2019-2021. This study identified the following problems and suggested solutions: [LINK](#)

THE PROBLEM



- **60%** of scripted dramas include gun-related content.
- Of these, the majority are from **police shows**.
- Nearly 1 in 3 episodes of popular television portrays **at least one character discharging a firearm**.
- In most cases, **the people holding guns are “good guys” and the people being shot are “bad guys.”**
- But in an interesting and important role reversal, **more than half of the people shot on TV are white men.**

SOME SOLUTIONS

- “**Avoid portraying law enforcement use-of-force as heroic.** Consider showing law enforcement characters facing consequences, or at least scrutiny for such actions, which are rarely depicted.
- “**Humanize and diversify depictions of those affected by gun violence.** Nuanced depictions of shooting victims can make audiences care about gun violence as a public issue.
- “**Appeal to common values.** Heavy-handed stories can be alienating to gun owners who feel their freedoms are being threatened, or their beliefs mocked. Instead of making gun owners the antagonist, appeal to the common values shared by parents and others who care about keeping children safe.
- “**Even though gun owners are tougher on the whole to persuade, *gun storylines do still have an effect on their opinion.*** In other words, your stories matter.

COP SHOWS



CONTEXT

Every police procedural owes its DNA to *Dragnet*, a show so invested in the valorization of the police that LAPD Chief William Parker got final approval on every script. [LINK](#) It was the same Chief Parker who said of the Black Angelenos his department was notorious for violently beating: “We didn’t ask these people to come here.” All of our most familiar “TV Cop” tropes stem from *Dragnet*. Hollywood created them; Hollywood can change them.

According to the MIP/Everytown study looking at depictions of gun safety on television: [LINK](#)

- More than 9 in 10 law enforcement characters with guns were portrayed as sympathetic compared to few civilian characters.
- Civilian characters were more likely than law enforcement to fire their weapons or shoot someone.
- Civilians who held a gun were more than twice as likely to shoot someone as law enforcement officers.

CONSEQUENCES

- Sympathetic criminal justice professionals on TV often do wrong, harmful, or illegal things which are presented as common, innocuous, or necessary. These characters rarely face consequences and are almost always rewarded. The message then being that bad actions by law enforcement are forgivable, acceptable, and even noble. [LINK](#)
- Meanwhile, these wrongful actions are often implicitly endorsed by a “good guy” character of color. In so doing, writers are assuring audiences that any actions by law enforcement, no matter how deadly, are “good” and sanctioned by “good people.” [LINK](#)
- “Good guys” on dramas are largely diverse, but the “bad guys” who get shot are predominantly nameless and white. [LINK](#) The reality is that law enforcement shootings disproportionately affect communities of color. **(As previously mentioned, unarmed Black civilians are 5x as likely to be shot by police as unarmed white civilians.)** [LINK](#) This misrepresentation of the people most affected by police shootings could distort public perceptions of these events.

SAFE STORAGE

Firearms are the #1 cause of death for children and teens.

THE PROBLEM

- **54% of gun owners don't lock all of their guns securely.** [LINK](#)
- **Everyday, 8 children are unintentionally shot or killed** by an unsecured gun in the home. [LINK](#)
- Every year, nearly 350 children under the age of 18 unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else. [LINK](#)
- Access to a gun in the home increases the risk of death by suicide by 300%. [LINK](#)
- On average, 54% of child and teen deaths by firearm occurred through homicide, 38% through suicide, and 5% were unintentional. [LINK](#)
- Over 80% of child gun suicides involve a gun owned by a family member. [LINK](#)
- 85% of child gun homicides occur inside the home. [LINK](#)
- **An estimated 30 million children in the US live in households with firearms, and 4.6 million live in a home with at least one loaded and unlocked gun.** [LINK](#)
- One study showed that **1 in 5 parents** who said their child never handled guns without supervision were contradicted by their child's reports. [LINK](#)
- A relatively modest increase in safe storage — locking all household firearms — could reduce firearm suicide and unintentional firearm fatalities among youth by up to **32%**. [LINK](#)

ON TV

Guns are everywhere on TV, but depictions of safe storage, gun laws, how guns are acquired, and the ripple effect consequences of shootings on families and communities are virtually nonexistent.

The study by MIP/Everytown found that **“fewer than 10% of episodes with guns show any kind of gun storage,”** secure or otherwise. [LINK](#)



Everytown for Gun Safety's Guide to Secure Gun Storage Devices [LINK](#)



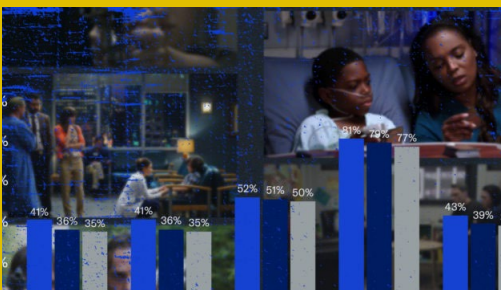
SOME SOLUTIONS



- **THE SOLUTION ON SCREEN = THE SOLUTION AT HOME**
- Lock it up at home. Lock it up on screen.
- When a character comes home with a gun, show them locking it away separate from its ammunition. No more laying the gun on the counter, bedside table, or under the pillow. The action should be as natural as putting on a seatbelt when driving.
- Representation of safe storage is imperative to the normalization of safe storage for your audiences.
- [Use this guide](#) from the Bullet Points Project for the myriad forms of safe storage.
- **Show how quickly guns can be accessed from safe storage in an emergency.**
 - **Don't make retrieval of a gun from safe storage an opportunity for consequences.**
 - **Audiences shouldn't be made to feel less safe in locking a gun away securely, since the truth is empirically the opposite.**
- On the other hand, consider consequences for the characters not interested in safety.
- When depicting mass shootings, in schools or otherwise, consider drawing a clear connection to unsafe storage or insufficient gun laws. [LINK](#)

“Gun safety represents a largely untapped story opportunity. When told, these stories can change hearts and minds. [LINK](#)”

THE MIP/EVERYTOWN STUDY FOUND...



“Although portrayals of gun safety and gun violence prevention are rare, when they do appear, they can have a substantial impact on viewers' knowledge, attitudes, and support for what Everytown refers to as common-sense gun laws.”

“A storyline about a child shooting a playmate with an improperly stored gun led viewers to feel less safe with a firearm at home, and made them more likely to endorse the importance of storing guns and ammunition separately. [LINK](#)”

CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING

KIDS TV

Social Learning Theory proposes that children learn how to behave by observing and imitating the behavior of models.

Research has shown that children who watch movie characters smoke cigarettes are more likely to smoke themselves. [LINK](#)

Children who watch characters drink alcohol are also more likely to drink themselves. [LINK](#)

The same is true for guns.

- On screen representation of characters using guns desensitizes children to the consequences of guns but increases their interest in them.
- In one experiment analyzing the effects of gun representation in film and TV on kids, children who viewed a PG-rated movie containing guns played with a real gun longer and pulled the trigger more times than did children who viewed the same movie not containing guns. [LINK](#)
 - Some of the children in the experiment played with the real gun by pointing it at themselves, at their friend, or out the window at pedestrians on the street. [LINK](#)

THE PROBLEM

- The typical American child **sees over 40,000 simulated murders** by the age of 18. [LINK](#)
- **85% of children** under 13 who are victims of gun homicide die in their home. [LINK](#)
- According to Brady United, an estimated **30 million children** in the US live in households with firearms, and 4.6 million live in a home with at least one loaded and unlocked gun. [LINK](#)

SOME SOLUTIONS

Children are mimics. With millions of children living in homes with loaded and unlocked guns, representation of guns in children's programming is dangerous.

Making the gun unique colors, strangely shaped, or futuristic is likely not enough. Remember that children don't need a toy car to look like a car to know it's a car!

Consider any and all alternatives to actual firearms. Holstered ice cream scoops. Teddy bear catapults. Rubber duck bubble gooshers. **Get weird with it!**

MASS SHOOTINGS & SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

THE PROBLEM

IS THAT THERE ARE BIGGER PROBLEMS

- Although suicides account for the majority of gun deaths in the US, **nearly 1 in 4 Americans believe mass shootings to be the greatest gun violence threat** facing their communities. [LINK](#)
- However, of the 45,222 people killed by gun violence in 2020, **mass shootings accounted for just 1%** of all gun deaths. [LINK](#)
- And yet **95% of American public K-12 schools** have implemented active shooter drills and at least 40 states have mandated them. [LINK](#)
- **Guns in the home, not school, pose the biggest threat to children.** 76% of school shootings are facilitated by kids having access to unsecured and/or unsupervised guns at home. [LINK](#)

Active-Shooter Drills:

- There is little evidence to suggest these training methods are effective at preventing mass shootings or minimizing their impact.
- Instead, these drills are shown to cause depression, stress, and anxiety in children. [LINK](#)
- In one survey of American youth, 60% reported that active shooter drills leave them feeling “scared and hopeless” and 21% reported feeling afraid to go to school. [LINK](#)

SOME SOLUTIONS

- **Create a culture of gun safety.** Characters must show that safely and separately locking away firearms and ammunition is the norm and not the exception.
- **Storylines about school shootings need to address the systemic issues, means of access to guns, and recognizable warning signs** that not only contribute to the violence, but highlight tangible issues we have the power to fix.
- According to the MIP/Everytown study, *“A storyline about children traumatized by an active-shooter drill caused such tactics to be perceived as less effective and more emotionally harmful.”*
- *“This storyline also motivated increased support for policies regulating the use of these training techniques in schools, particularly those with any form of simulated violence.”* [LINK](#)

Your stories matter.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

THE PROBLEM

- The mere presence of a firearm can threaten, intimidate, psychologically abuse, and force compliance on a partner. [LINK](#)
- **Every 16 hours**, a woman is shot dead by her current or former partner. [LINK](#)
- An average of **547 women are shot and killed** by a current or former male intimate partner every year. [LINK](#)
- **1 million women** alive today report having been shot or shot at by an intimate partner. [LINK](#)
- **4.5 million women** have reported being threatened with a gun by an intimate partner. [LINK](#)
- Women in the US are **21 times more likely** to die by firearm homicide than women in peer nations [LINK](#) and **92% of all women** killed with guns in 2015 were from the U.S. [LINK](#)
- Abusers with firearms are **five times more likely** to kill their victims, and guns further exacerbate the power and control dynamic used by abusers to inflict emotional abuse and exert coercive control over their victims. [LINK](#)
- Nearly **3 in 4 children and teens killed** in mass shootings were shot by a person connected to domestic violence. [LINK](#)



- Black women are 2x as likely to be shot by an intimate partner as white women.
 - **Younger Black women are at the highest risk** — Black women between the ages of 18 and 34 are 3x more likely to be shot and killed by an intimate partner than are white women in the same age group. [LINK](#)
- Research on intimate partner violence (IPV) among the LGBTQIA+ community suggests that **lesbian women, bisexual women and men, and transgender individuals** report the highest rates of lifetime IPV compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts.
 - However, **research in this area is severely limited** due to the lack of gender identity and sexual orientation ID on death records. [LINK](#)



ON TV

FROM "DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN HOLLYWOOD FILM: GASLIGHTING"

BY DIANE SHOOSA [LINK](#)

Films about domestic violence rely very heavily on pretty standard Hollywood genres... where we absolutely anticipate there will be a confrontation between the victim and the abuser. So the work of the narrative is to completely isolate her and make it — ironically — totally her problem that she has to solve. In a strange way these movies are seen as empowering to women but they're not, because everything is put back on women's shoulders. What's astounding is that the prototypical narrative is for the woman to kill the abuser. And as any kind of real-life solution, this is totally fantastical and in fact dangerous; women who confront their abusers typically are attacked and killed themselves.

When you have a social problem like domestic violence, which is behind closed doors, what's in these movies matters incredibly. The public conversation is still uncomfortable. Or just one that's not as likely to happen. So what the screen is telling us is really important. It's going to be a primary factor in forming our opinions.

SOME SOLUTIONS

A California study found that women who bought a gun were twice as likely to die by firearm homicide as women who did not. [LINK](#)

There is no research supporting the idea that gun ownership makes women safer. But study after study confirms the opposite - women who live in a home with a firearm are at greater risk of homicide. [LINK](#)

Media and storylines that advocate for women to be armed with guns is particularly dangerous since the empirical truth is this: **access to a firearm is directly associated with an increased risk of intimate partner homicide.**

- The only real way to reduce intimate partner homicide is to disrupt access to firearms for both victim and abuser. [LINK](#)

ON THE NEWS

THE PROBLEM



- **Mass shootings are 6 times as likely to make the news** than any other kind of gun related death. [LINK](#)
 - This creates an outsized fear for a relatively rare event while simultaneously obscuring the real and prolific dangers of gun ownership when it comes to suicides, domestic violence, and unintentional shootings by children.
- That said, **coverage of mass shootings demands thoughtful care** as research shows that media can influence imitation. [LINK](#)
 - Coverage of mass shootings often repeatedly presents the shooter's image, manifesto, life story, and details of the event. Doing so can directly influence imitation. [LINK](#)



ACCORDING TO DR. JAMES MEINDL AND DR. JONATHAN IVY IN THEIR PAPER, "MASS SHOOTINGS: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING GENERALIZED IMITATION":



Social status is conferred when the mass shooter obtains a significant level of notoriety from news reports. Images displaying shooters aiming guns at the camera project an air of danger and toughness. Similarities between the shooter and others are brought to the surface through detailed accounts of the life of the shooter, with which others may identify. Fulfilled manifestos and repeated reports of body counts heap rewards on the violent act and display competence. Detailed play-by-play accounts of the event provide feedback on the performance of the shooter. All of these instances serve to create a model with sufficient detail to promote imitated mass shootings for some individuals. [LINK](#)



SOME SOLUTIONS



- The Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training team, in collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has developed the **“Don’t Name Them” campaign** [LINK](#) aimed at curbing media-induced imitational mass shootings. It suggests:
 - Minimizing naming and describing the individuals involved in mass shootings.
 - Limiting sensationalism.
 - Refusing to broadcast shooter statements or videos. [LINK](#)
- **Other strategies include:**
 - Present the shooter’s actions (preparation, planning, shooting) as cowardly and shameful, since associating observed behavior with punishment has been shown to decrease the likelihood of imitation.
 - Avoid in-depth descriptions of the shooter’s rationale for engaging in the behavior.
 - For example, stating that a shooter took revenge after years of bullying may portray a mass shooting as one possible response option for individuals experiencing bullying and with similar backgrounds as the shooter.
 - Reduce overall duration of news coverage.
 - An increase in imitation suicides has been linked to increased media coverage of a suicide event. The same may be true for imitation mass shootings. [LINK](#)
 - Limit the use of live press events immediately following a mass shooting.
 - This would minimize the perceived reward and help decrease overall interest, by not adding “excitement” to the event. [LINK](#)
 - Avoid sensationalism. Present only the facts and aim to do so in a dull manner.
 - Frantic, breathless energy around the coverage of a mass shooting might look like a reward to a would-be imitator.
 - Avoid providing detailed accounts of the actions of a mass shooter before, during, or after the event.
 - The less the behavior is described, the less likely it is to be imitated. [LINK](#)

ON THE NEWS

SUICIDE



THE SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE IS #988.

THE PROBLEM

- **Suicide is contagious.** Over 100 studies worldwide have found that risk of contagion is real and responsible reporting can reduce the risk of additional suicides.

SOME SOLUTIONS

- Report suicide as a public health issue. Including stories on hope, healing, and recovery may reduce the risk of contagion.
- Include resources. Provide information on warning signs of suicide risk as well as hotline and treatment resources.

RESOURCES



Reporting on Suicide
[Guide Here](#)



Action Alliance
[Guide Here](#)

- **Use appropriate language.** Certain phrases and words can further stigmatize suicide, spread myths, and undermine suicide prevention objectives such as “committed suicide” or referring to suicide as “successful,” “unsuccessful” or a “failed attempt.” **Instead use “died by suicide” or “killed him/herself.”**
- Emphasize help and hope. Stories of recovery through help-seeking and positive coping skills are powerful, especially when they come from people who have experienced suicide risk.

ON THE NEWS

RACE

THE PROBLEM

- **White shooters are 95% more likely to be described as “mentally ill”** than their Black and brown counterparts. [LINK](#)
- Even when Black shooters were described as mentally ill, **the coverage was not as forgiving as it was for whites** responsible for similar kinds of attacks. [LINK](#)
 - When shooters were framed in the media as mentally ill, 78% of white attackers were described as being victims of society — as being under a lot of stress, for example — versus only 17% of Black shooters. [LINK](#)
- Violent acts by white criminals are almost always treated as anomalous incidents of mental illness, out of step with who they “really are.” Whereas violent acts by **Black criminals are treated as endemic to their inherent criminality.**

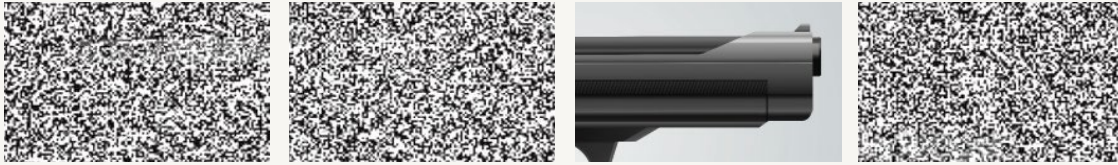
A SOLUTION

- Conscientiousness. By succumbing to tropes and stereotypes, **the perpetuation of these narratives makes it harder to adequately assess threats and enact policy** that can truly help to reduce gun violence for everyone.



Researchers at Ohio State University compared coverage of two mass shooters — Josh Boren, a white man, and David Ray Conley, a Black man.

“The comparison between Conley and Boren is striking. Both shooters were adult men who murdered their families. Both had a history of domestic violence and drug abuse, and both had received treatment for mental illness. However, whereas the media described Josh Boren as a quiet, gentle man — a ‘teddy bear’ — coverage of Conley described him as perpetually violent, controlling and dangerous,” the researchers said. [LINK](#)



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