

Case Study: Summer 2023 Community Partner Program in Chicago

Project Unloaded is on a mission to reduce gun violence through narrative and culture change, leveraging the power of Gen Z and social media to spread the message that guns make us less safe. In addition to [our digital campaigns](#) reaching millions of teens on social media platforms, Project Unloaded’s Community Partner Program aims to engage teens in cities where our digital campaigns are active. Through this program, we hope to amplify the work of organizations and young people already making a difference, and encourage teens in areas with elevated rates of gun violence to think critically about the impact that guns have on their lives and communities.

What We Did

During the summer of 2023, Project Unloaded piloted the Community Partner Program alongside Chicago Public Schools for a 6-week summer intensive, and After School Matters for a 1-week creative content challenge. Between these two programs, we reached nearly 300 Chicago high school students with information about why guns make communities less safe and how social media can be a tool for culture change. As part of our programs, students were tasked with designing their own creative responses to inspire other teens to decide against using guns and help change gun culture in their communities.

During the 6 week intensive, 50 students from Chicago Public School’s Choose 2 Change summer jobs program were tasked with becoming marketing professionals, addressing gun culture through a creative campaign that could reach their peers on social media. During the first 3 weeks, students were immersed in an experiential learning curriculum about gun violence, gun culture, and how art, media and marketing can be a force for change.

“I felt like this program is really doing something in showing teens that guns...is not always the answer.”

- Miracle, 17



The winning team from our CPS summer program with Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson

In the last 3 weeks of the program, students worked in teams with mentors from leading creative and PR agencies to create campaign concepts and sample social media content. On the last day of our program, the teens presented their ideas in a pitch competition in front of nearly 500 peers and a panel of judges that included Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson.

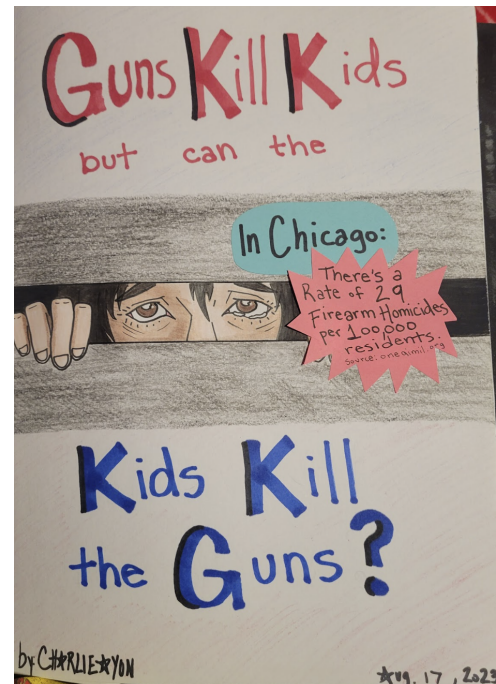
The winning campaign slogan was a simple one: *Guns Don’t Give You Power.*

During a subsequent one week challenge with After School Matters, more than 200 students used creative expressions, such as poetry, art and social media posts, to explore how they can change gun culture in their communities. In both programs, young people earned a stipend for their participation. Content created by students in these programs is incorporated into Project Unloaded digital campaigns.

The Results

The data clearly demonstrates that young people of color are disproportionately harmed by gun violence. All but three students in our CPS program reported having a personal experience with gun violence. At the start of the program, many students expressed a deep sense of hopelessness that gun violence could be prevented, or that their voices could make a difference. Over the course of the program, teens began to understand the power of culture change campaigns and how they could play a role in shifting gun culture in their communities. Together with our partners at Chicago Public Schools, we asked students about their experiences at the start of our 6-week program and again once the program wrapped. The written feedback we collected mirrored our conversations with students throughout their time with us. Some notable findings include:

- Before going through our program, most students said they were considering gun ownership. At the same time, students agreed that their communities would be safer with fewer guns.
- By the end of our 6-week program, the percentage of students who said they definitely or probably would own a gun fell by over 20 points.
- Participants cited a new understanding of the risks of gun ownership and the impact of gun violence in their community.
- Students felt more confident talking to peers about guns and gun culture in their community.
- Many enjoyed learning about marketing careers and how social media can be used to positively impact a serious issue.



Student submission from the first After School Matters partnership with Project Unloaded

What's Next

Following a successful pilot, Project Unloaded plans to expand our partnerships in Chicago and other cities, including Sacramento. Our programming will continue educating teens on the risks of having guns and challenge them to leverage their social media skills to spread that message creatively. To connect about a potential partnership for teens, [fill out the form here](#).