

GUN SMOKE

**AN ANALYSIS OF HOW
LABOR STRIKES MAY HAVE
IMPACTED NETWORK TV GUN
PORTRAYALS IN FALL 2023**

A report from the Project Unloaded Youth Council: Anvesha Guru, Edgar Vilchez, Emma Hackbarth, Esha Ambre, Karly Scholz, Laya Venkatasubramanian, Lily Lee-Sin, Madhurum Bhuvan, Paige Carter, Reyansh Gangal, Sarsha O’Sullivan, Shiven Patel, Stephanie Diaz, Zoe Kaufman; and Project Unloaded staff.

INTRODUCTION

To stop gun violence, we must change the narrative on guns. Most people believe that having a gun makes them safer. But it’s not true: having a gun at home increases the risk of homicide and suicide, and communities with more guns have more gun violence. That myth is leading more Americans to own guns, which in turn is driving up rates of gun deaths. And while there are many ways that people learn about guns, we know that a key source, particularly for young people, is the portrayal of guns in entertainment.

In summer 2023, it became clear that labor strikes would reshape fall television. With writing and production on hold for most scripted shows, networks rushed to greenlight more unscripted content that could fill the airwaves this fall. At Project Unloaded, we wondered how this shift in fall TV content might impact the number of televised stories, and types of stories, involving guns. We suspected that less scripted content could mean fewer guns on TV, and were curious about the stories with guns that would remain.

To understand how the shift in fall 2023 television may impact the lessons TV offers about gun use, Project Unloaded’s Youth Council watched and coded 127 episodes, adding up to more than 150 hours of content, shown on primetime network television from the last week of September in 2022 and the last week of September in 2023. We then looked at the ratings in 2022 and 2023 to compare performance of primetime network content with and without guns across the two years.

What we found was compelling:

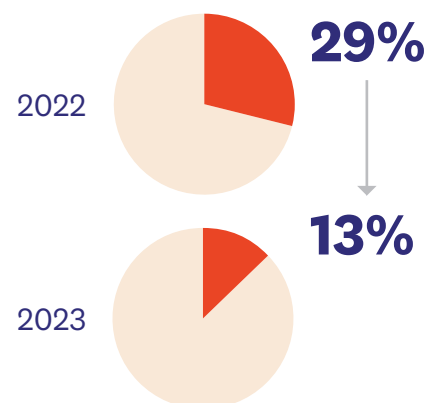
Episodes with guns decreased from 2022 to 2023.

- Across the four networks we reviewed, a total of 25 episodes that included a gun ran in 2022. In the 2023 week we reviewed, there were just 15 episodes with a gun and 10 of them were on CBS. In both years, CBS showed more guns than any other network.
- Excluding CBS gun content, the rate of gun appearances across other network shows shrunk from 29% in 2022 to 13% in 2023.

We found no evidence that showing guns or gun violence led to more viewers.

- Television’s most violent night is Tuesday, with the most guns shown and fired on that night in 2022 and 2023. But shows without guns led the ratings on Tuesday nights both years.

Rate of gun appearances across network shows, excluding CBS



- In 2022, shows without guns won 77% of time slots. In 2023, shows without guns won 96% of their time slots. The only show that did win its time slot and feature a firearm in the 2023 week we reviewed was not a scripted drama, but a Friday night episode of 20/20 on ABC.

The real world impact of guns is different from how guns are portrayed on TV.

- While most gun deaths in real life are suicides, guns were shown or fired just once each year related to a suicide. Similarly, the dangers of guns were discussed just once across both years.

Guns will always be part of some stories, but our analysis proves that they aren't always necessary for making compelling, profitable television. If we can move away from normalizing guns on screen, perhaps we can move away from normalizing them in real life too and slowly turn the tide on our cultural attachment to guns.

METHODOLOGY

We watched and coded gun depictions and mentions in every available show that ran between 8 pm ET and 11 pm ET across three major networks, CBS, NBC and ABC during the last week of September in 2022 and that same week in 2023. Because Fox switches to local news at 10 pm, we watched content from 8-10 pm ET from that network both years.

Specific dates were September 25 to October 1 in 2022 and September 24 to September 30 in 2023. The 14 members of the [Project Unloaded Youth Council](#) watched more than 150 hours of content and documented the type of show, whether a gun was shown, whether it was fired, and in what context a gun was shown and fired.¹ The data and findings were reviewed by Dan Romer, Research Director at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

KEY FINDINGS

To understand how guns were portrayed on TV in 2022 and 2023, we logged every show that included guns in both years, the type of person holding a gun, whether a gun was fired, why it was fired and if the show included any mention of the risks of having a gun. In addition to those questions, we compared the networks against each other to understand differences in gun use across networks and nights of television.

¹ The only show we could not watch was an hour-long Saturday night NBC special called "Halloween in Hollywood" from 2022. This show is no longer available on NBC's website or any streaming providers.

Our initial hypothesis proved correct. Indeed, the week of fall TV in 2023 we reviewed included just 15 scripted shows and the remaining 35 episodes were all unscripted, including 7 blocks of sports content. In 2022, networks ran 38 scripted shows and 25 unscripted shows, including 6 sports blocks, that same week. With production paused on scripted shows, network television programming changed and as a result, fewer shows included guns.

How Guns Are Portrayed on Television

- Across the four networks we reviewed, a total of 25 episodes that included a gun ran in 2022. In the 2023 week we reviewed, there were just 15 episodes with a gun and 10 of them were on CBS.
- Of the shows that included a gun in 2023, 10 of them (66%) were reruns, eight of which ran on CBS.²
- Though there were fewer episodes with guns on network TV in 2023, guns were fired at a higher rate in 2023 than in 2022. While 48% of episodes with a gun included a fired gun in 2022, 93% of the shows with a gun in 2023 included at least one gun that was fired.
- Most guns on network TV are carried by either law enforcement officers, which we coded as carrying a gun for protection, or by people committing a crime. It is rare to see guns carried by civilians who are not engaging in a criminal act.
- In 2022, guns were twice as likely to be carried for protection than for commission of a crime. In 2023, we coded an equal number of guns carried for “protection,” largely by law enforcement, and guns carried for “crime.”
- Comparing 2022 to 2023, there was a 50% decrease in shows with guns fired by private citizens. Across both years, guns were most frequently fired by people engaging in a criminal act.
- Episodes with a gun or guns fired by law enforcement officers nearly doubled between 2022 and 2023.

When Guns are On Television

Tuesday night was the most violent night on TV in both years, depicting the most guns used and fired. **However, in both years shows without guns outperformed shows with guns on Tuesday night.**

² On CBS, the reruns with a gun or several were: *NCIS (3)*, *FBI*, *Yellowstone*, *FBI International*, *FBI Most Wanted*, and *Blue Bloods*. The other two reruns with gun use were an episode of *9-1-1: Lone Star* on Fox and an episode of *The Irrational* on NBC.

In both years, Wednesday nights included the fewest shows with guns or guns fired, with 2 episodes with guns running in 2022 and none airing that night in 2023. We anticipated that we would find the fewest gun episodes on nights of TV when sports content dominates, but Wednesdays won out because CBS, which is responsible for most episodes with guns on network TV, runs Survivor and The Amazing Race from 8 - 11 pm on Wednesday nights.

The 9-10 pm ET hour showed the most guns in 2022 and the 10-11 pm ET hour showed the most guns in 2023 as more networks filled the primetime 9-10 pm hour with new unscripted content.

Network comparisons

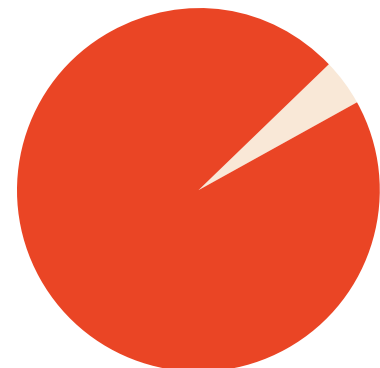
- CBS led the networks in showing the most guns in 2022 and 2023. In 2023, CBS showed more guns than all other networks combined.
- Excluding CBS gun content, the rate of gun appearances across other network shows shrunk from 29% in 2022 to 13% in 2023.
- Even after accounting for the difference in hours of content we were able to watch on Fox compared to other networks, Fox still showed the fewest guns in the 2022 week. Fox showed just 3 guns in 2022, compared to 2 in 2023.
- In 2023, ABC showed just one gun across its week of content. The sole gun shown was in a crime reenactment in an episode of 20/20.

What the Ratings Say about Gun Content

- In 2022, shows without guns won 77% of timeslots.
- In 2023, shows without guns won 96% of their timeslots.

Additional Findings

- While the bulk of gun deaths in real life are suicides, storylines related gun suicide are rare on television. In 2022, the only gun suicide reference was featured in an episode of FBI Most Wanted on CBS. In 2023, a rerun of Yellowstone on CBS featured the only gun suicide depicted this week.
- Just one show mentioned the risks of having a gun across both years – an episode of La Brea on NBC in 2022. In the episode, a civilian carrying a gun was told by their friend that it was a bad idea.



96%

Shows without guns won 96% of their timeslots in 2023.

CONCLUSIONS

We all know the phrase, “if it bleeds, it leads.” But when content featuring guns dropped dramatically in the fall of 2023, viewership of network shows remained stable. And in fact, in 2023 content without guns outperformed shows that portrayed guns and gun violence.

Hopefully soon, labor strikes will end and shows on hiatus will be rolling again and dreaming up their next seasons. But when it comes to guns on television, it’s time for a reset. These findings prove that TV can avoid content that reinforces the dangerous notion that we’re safer armed and be profitable. Below, we make some recommendations for how creators should move forward.

Recommendations for Content Creators

After reviewing more than 150 hours of content, we have some recommendations for those working on network TV shows.

1. [Research shows](#) that the portrayal of guns on television can impact people’s views on guns in real life. Knowing that, carefully weigh whether a gun is actually necessary to tell the story. Our findings show that guns are not necessary to earn strong ratings.
2. When a gun is used on television, consider using guns in ways that reinforce their [real life impact](#), rather than reinforcing the false notion that guns increase safety. In real life, it is [far more likely](#) that someone will be shot and killed by someone they know (and likely live with) rather than a stranger. On screen, across two years we viewed just one mention of the risks that come with carrying a gun. Balance portrayals of guns with information about the risks of keeping a gun at home and carrying a gun in public.
3. Even when shows feature law enforcement officers carrying guns, consider portraying decisions like leaving a gun at work, rather than bringing it home, where a loved one may inadvertently access it. [Nearly 5 million American children](#) live in homes with unsecured guns and most gun owners don’t [store all their guns](#) appropriately. Every year, hundreds of kids accidentally shoot themselves or someone else using a gun they found at home. This problem relates to school shootings too. Guns used in [two-thirds of school shootings](#) come from the home of the shooter or their friend’s home.
4. Avoid depicting guns as a “sure-fire” mechanism for safety and a frequent part of life as a police officer. Even for law enforcement officers, firing a gun is rare and it’s unlikely they hit their target.³

“Our findings show that guns are not necessary to earn strong ratings.”

³ For additional recommendations and findings related to scripted crime shows, see *Color of Change’s* report [here](#).

- [A Pew analysis](#) found that only a quarter of officers ever fire their guns and those that do are more likely to be male, white and more likely to oppose strengthening gun laws.
 - Studies of police departments have found that officers hit their target less than half the time. Colorado Springs police officers hit their targets 40% of the time, according to one study. A 2019 study found that officers in Dallas, Texas hit their mark 35% of the time.
5. Given fears of a suicide contagion effect, it is understandable that gun suicides are rarely depicted, even though they make up the bulk of gun deaths in the U.S. Still, there is an opportunity to address this crisis thoughtfully. Depict people deciding against getting a gun because of the [increased suicide risk](#) for families with firearms at home.

“When a gun is shown, creators should challenge themselves to depict firearms’ impact on society accurately.”

In summary, there are plenty of compelling stories to tell that avoid guns altogether, without giving up audience share. When a gun is shown, creators should challenge themselves to depict firearms’ impact on society accurately. Guns in homes and carried in public places increase the risk of death and injury. And the more people know that, the safer everyone will be.

APPENDIX

Number of Shows Aired by Network

Note: In this analysis, every TV episode, or content block, such as a football game, award show or special report, is considered a show. The number of shows each network ran went down between 2022 and 2023 because of an increase in longer unscripted blocks in 2023.

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC
2022	16	21	15	18
2023	14	19	14	10

Scripted vs Unscripted Shows in Primetime Network TV

Note: Though the hours of television watched across both years are consistent, 2023 had fewer shows as the networks opted for more hour-long content to fill time slots previously filled by half-hour episodes.

	Scripted Shows	Unscripted Shows, Excluding Sports	Sports
2022	38	25	6
2023	15	35	7

Total Gun Use Across Network TV

	Episodes Including a Gun	Episodes with a Gun Fired
2022	25	12
2023	15*	14

*In 2023, all but six of the shows featuring guns were reruns.

Episodes Including a Gun by Network

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC
2022	4	12	3	6
2023	1	10	2	2

Episodes Including a Gun Fired

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC
2022	1	6	1	4
2023	1	9	2	2

Episodes Including a Gun by Day of the Week

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
2022	3	3	6	2	5	3	3
2023	1	5	4	0	1	2	2

Episodes Including a Gun Fired by Day of the Week

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
2022	2	0	3	1	2	2	2
2023	1	4	4	0	1	2	2

Why Guns Were Carried

Note: The following chart analyzes how guns were carried across all shows. When guns were used for multiple purposes in a single show, we logged all purposes and tallied the uses in the chart below.

The “other” category listed below includes the following gun uses: sports/recreation (1 in 2023), in relation to a suicide (1 in 2022, 1 in 2022), and using a gun for intimidation (4 in 2022). The risks that come with using a gun were mentioned just once across both years in a 2022 episode of La Brea on NBC.

	Guns Carried for Protection	Guns Carried for Crime	Guns Carried for Other Reason
2022	24	13	5
2023	10	10	2

Who Carried the Gun

Note: The following chart analyzes how guns were carried across shows. When guns were used for multiple purposes in a single show, we logged all purposes and tallied the uses in the chart below.

	Carried by Law Enforcement	Carried by Private Citizen (Not presented as a criminal act)	Carried by Private Citizen (Presented as a criminal act)
2022	24	5	13
2023	10	2	10

Who Fired a Gun

Note: The following chart analyzes how guns were fired across shows. When guns were fired for multiple purposes in a single show, we logged all purposes and tallied the uses in the chart below.

	Carried by Law Enforcement	Carried by Private Citizen (Not presented as a criminal act)	Carried by Private Citizen (Presented as a criminal act)
2022	4	4	8
2023	7	2	8

Episodes with Guns by Hour

Note: Fox switches to local news at 10pm so for Fox, we could only code 8-10 pm both years for that network. We coded 8-11pm for ABC, CBS and NBC.

	8-9 pm	9-10 pm	10-11 pm
2022	3	12	10
2023	4	5	6

Episodes without Guns that Won the Timeslot

Note: All ratings information was pulled from publicly available numbers on spoilertv.com.

	Total Highest Rated Shows	Episodes Winning without Guns	Episodes Winning without Guns Fired
Amount in 2022	22	18	20
Amount in 2023	21	20	20

Ratings Appendix

Note: All ratings information was pulled from publicly available numbers on spoilertv.com.

2022

Sunday, September 25, 2022

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	NFL Football	NBC	No	No
9-10	NFL Football	NBC	No	No
10-11	NFL Football	NBC	No	No

Monday, September 26, 2022

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Monday Night Football	ABC	No	No
9-10	Monday Night Football	ABC	No	No
10-11	Monday Night Football	ABC	No	No

Tuesday, September 27, 2022

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	The Voice	NBC	No	No
9-10	Bachelor in Paradise	ABC	No	No
10-11	FBI: Most Wanted	CBS	Yes	No

Wednesday, September 28, 2022

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Chicago Med*	NBC	No	No
9-10	Chicago Fire	NBC	No	No
10-11	Chicago PD	NBC	Yes	Yes

*On Wednesday, September 27, 2022 NBC's Chicago Med and CBS's Survivor had tied ratings during the 8-9 hour, but Chicago Med had a higher number of raw viewers.

Thursday, September 29, 2022

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-8:30	Young Sheldon	CBS	Yes	No
8:30-9	Ghosts	CBS	No	No
9-10	Law and Order: SVU	NBC	Yes	Yes
10-11	Law and Order: Organized Crime	NBC	No	No

Friday, September 30, 2022

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	WWE	FOX	No	No
9-10	WWE	FOX	No	No
10-11	Dateline	FOX	No	No

Saturday, October 1, 2022

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	College Football	ABC	No	No
9-10	College Football	ABC	No	No
10-11	College Football	ABC	No	No

2023

Sunday, September 24, 2023

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	NFL Football	NBC	No	No
9-10	NFL Football	NBC	No	No
10-11	NFL Football	NBC	No	No

Monday, September 25, 2023

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Monday Night Football	ABC	No	No
9-10	Monday Night Football	ABC	No	No
10-11	Monday Night Football	ABC	No	No

Tuesday, September 26, 2023

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Dancing with the Stars	ABC	No	No
9-10	Dancing with the Stars	ABC	No	No
10-11	Celebrity Family Feud	ABC	No	No

Wednesday, September 27, 2023

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Survivor	CBS	No	No
9-10	Survivor	CBS	No	No
10-11	America's Got Talent	NBC	No	No

Thursday, September 28, 2023

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	The Golden Bachelor	ABC	No	No
9-10	Big Brother	CBS	No	No
10-11	Bachelor in Paradise	ABC	No	No

Friday, September 29, 2023

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	WWE	FOX	No	No
9-10	WWE	FOX	No	No
10-11	20/20	ABC	Yes	Yes

Saturday, September 30, 2023

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	College Football	ABC	No	No
9-10	College Football	ABC	No	No
10-11	College Football	ABC	No	No