



ANNUAL REPORT

2023

project 
unloaded

A MESSAGE FROM OUR FOUNDER

At Project Unloaded, we believe that narrative change is essential to turning the page on gun violence. As recent [Gallup polling](#) confirmed, most Americans believe that having a gun makes them safer. As a result, household gun ownership is [at its highest point](#) in recent history and gun deaths remain stubbornly high — particularly for [children and teens](#). But it wasn't always this way. In fact, as recently as the early 2000s, just a third of Americans believed a gun made them safer and household gun ownership was declining.

Our culture shifted over the last 20 years in favor of gun ownership and it can shift again, especially if we empower young people to lead the way. Our confidence in young people is more than just sunny optimism — it's backed by the data. Just like most adults, the [majority of young people](#) have bought into the myth that a gun increases safety. But unlike adults, teens are hungry to learn the facts about the risks associated with gun use, and when they do, their views can shift.

It's no secret that young people drive culture. Our job is to reach young people in the places where they're already spending time. With that mission in mind, this year Project Unloaded:

- Reached millions of teens on TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram with our *SNUG* (Safer Not Using Guns) campaign — inspiring more than 180,000 of them to click through to learn more on our website
- Earned more than [2.7 million views](#) of *SNUG* TikTok content through partnerships with 24 Gen Z and Millennial TikTok content creators
- Launched our Community Partner Program, empowering more than 300 Chicago teens with the facts about the risks of having a gun and the tools they need to change gun culture
- Developed and launched a research-backed campaign — called [Guns Change the Story](#) — specifically for teens in communities disproportionately harmed by gun violence
- Produced a report authored by our Youth Council, assessing the decline of gun use on TV and its impact on ratings during the Hollywood labor strikes



Nina Vinik
Founder and
Executive Director



3M

Project Unloaded's signature campaign earned nearly 3 million views on TikTok

300+

Empowered more than 300 Chicago teens through the Community Partner Program

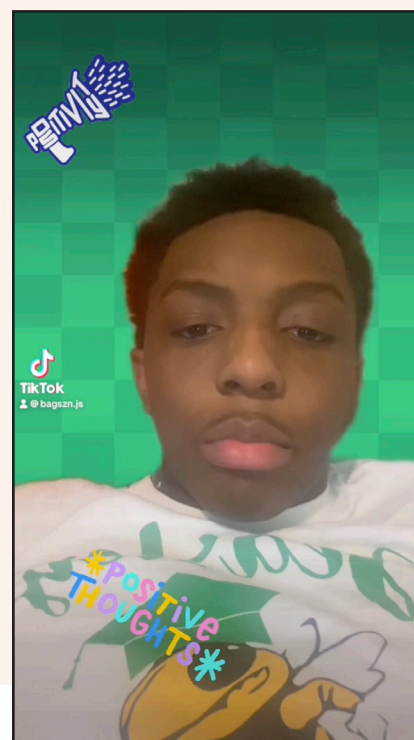
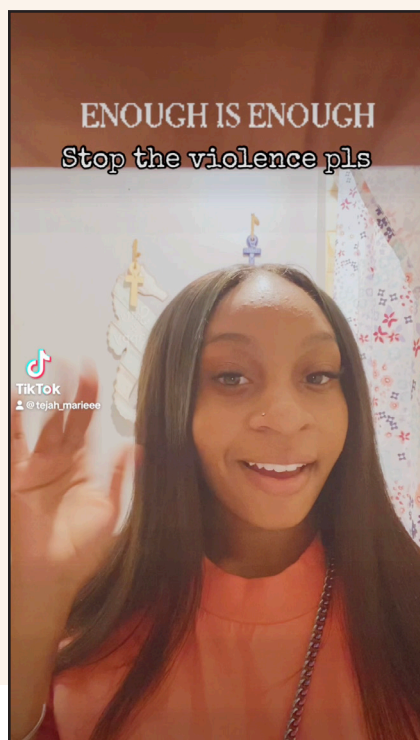
- Launched a new SMS program to reach adult supporters and our target teen audience through tailored text messages
- Working closely with our Youth Council, produced hundreds of native social posts to celebrate our progress and amplify the message that more guns make us less safe

Heading into next year, we're confident in our approach and hopeful for the future. On an issue like gun violence, there will always be heartbreaking days. But we believe that change is coming thanks to a generation that's fed up with gun violence and stands ready to write a new narrative that guns do not make us safe. Thank you for doing your part to stand with them.

Gratefully,

Nina Vinik

Founder and Executive Director



Submissions from our summer partnership with After School Matters where Chicago teens produced creative responses about how gun violence impacts their lives.

OUR CAMPAIGNS

GENERATION SNUG

Our *SNUG* (Safer Not Using Guns) campaign launched on TikTok and Snapchat in January 2022 and continues to land with teens, exceeding our engagement benchmarks many times over. The campaign is designed to connect with teens who haven't made up their minds about guns and are interested in learning more (we think of them as a "moveable middle"). In 2023, we expanded this successful campaign. The *SNUG* campaign has now:

- Reached more than 3 million 13-17-year-olds with new and improved ads on TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat
- Prompted over 180,000 teens to click through a *SNUG* ad to learn more on [YouSNUG.com](https://www.yousnug.com)
- Delivered a video completion rate 14 points ahead of industry benchmarks on Snapchat
- Earned more than 3.2 million completed video views across ads and influencer content
- Educated teens on the risks of using guns nationally via influencer content and via targeted social media ads in 12 cities



Lily Lee-Sin, our Youth Council's co-chair, was featured alongside other Youth Council members in a set of SNUG social media ads this year.

3 MILLION

teens in...

12 CITIES

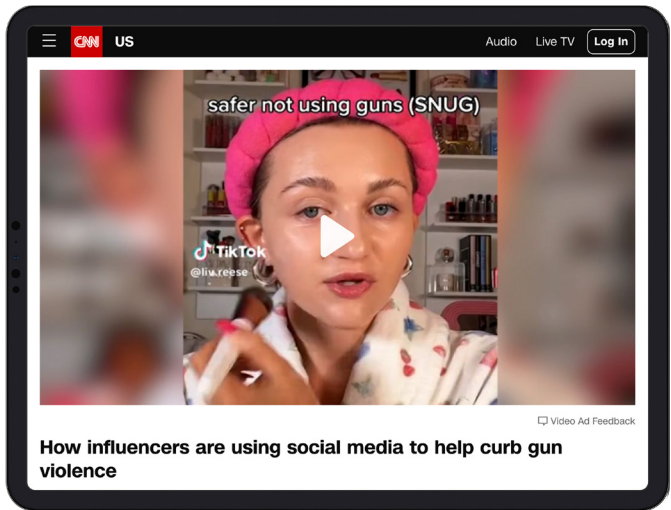
who together watched...

50,000+ MINUTES

of *SNUG* content



Together, the metrics from our social media ads and influencer content indicate that *SNUG* is effectively driving teens to learn more about why they're Safer Not Using Guns. More campaign analysis is included in a campaign [impact report](#) created by the research firm Influence SG this fall. Next, we'll launch a new round of *SNUG* ads driving teens to join our SMS list so that we can keep sharing data on why they're Safer Not Using Guns in the months and years to come.



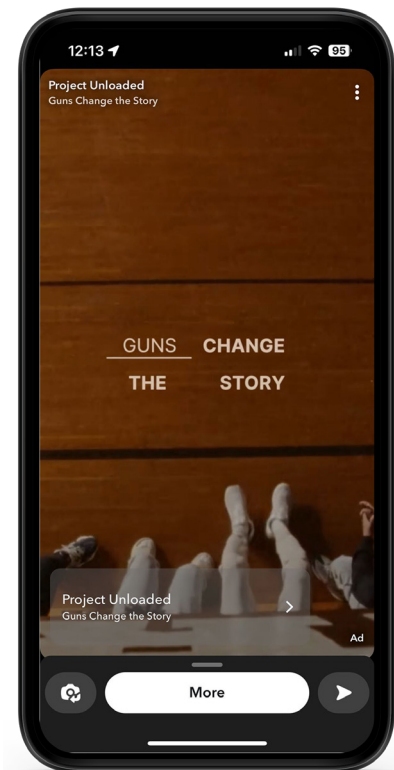
In September, CNN ran a package on the *SNUG* campaign's innovative work with young influencers.

NEW CAMPAIGN: **GUNS CHANGE THE STORY**

Designed to reach teens in communities disproportionately impacted by gun violence, our newest campaign is called “*Guns Change the Story*.” The campaign, which launched in December in Chicago and Sacramento, features videos of real teens accompanied by eye-catching MadLibs that challenge young people to recognize how the presence of a gun can change the tone and risk profile of everyday moments.

This new digital campaign was designed by the LA-based [Cartwright agency](#), and is informed by a working group of experts on gun violence, youth marketing and Black and Latino community engagement that includes UC Davis public health researcher [Shani Buggs](#), Yale Law School's [Tracey Meares](#) and Youth ALIVE! Advocacy Director [Gabriel Garcia](#). It is also infused with the views and experiences of Black and Latino teens who live in cities struggling with gun violence. Read on to learn about our research partnership with Ahzul, and our work with Chicago teens, that propel *Guns Change the Story*.

In 2024, we'll optimize the campaign based on data from its initial run, and we'll expand its reach as we learn more about how teens react to this fresh take on a crisis that impacts their daily lives.

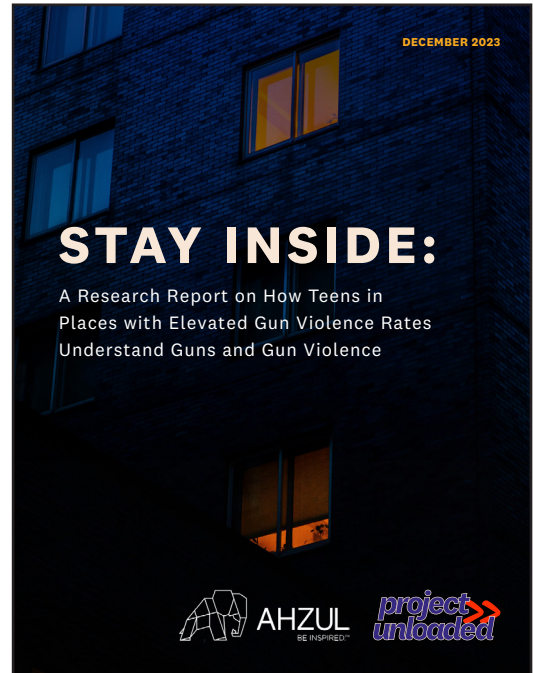


RESEARCH + LEARNING

Early in the year, we began working with the multicultural market research firm [Ahzul](#) to better understand how teens in communities most impacted by violence view guns and safety issues where they live. Through both qualitative and quantitative rounds of research, we worked to understand how fact-based messaging could impact teens' views of guns and the likelihood they would own or carry them in the future. We found a significant opportunity to intervene before young people have made up their minds on guns and help them shift against using guns by sharing the facts.

Together, we put together a report called “Stay Inside,” which delves into the experiences with guns and gun violence that drive so many teens to say they need a gun to be safe. We also found that, just like the suburban teens in our *SNUG* campaign audience, these teens are willing to shift their views on guns after exposure to the facts about how guns put them more at risk. The full report is [here](#).

The findings were used to develop the look, feel and content of Project Unloaded’s newest campaign, *Guns Change the Story*.



57%

of multicultural urban teens surveyed expressed interest in knowing more about the risks and benefits of having a gun

18%

of teens surveyed shifted away from the myth that guns increase safety after exposure to facts about the risks of having a gun



ELEVATING YOUNG LEADERS

PILOTING OUR COMMUNITY PARTNER PROGRAM

Just as *Guns Change the Story* aims to reach teens in the communities most impacted by gun violence online, our Community Partner Program works to engage that same population of teens through offline programming. Project Unloaded piloted our Community Partner Program in Chicago over the summer alongside Chicago Public Schools and After School Matters. During these activities, hundreds of high school students were introduced to information about why guns make communities less safe and how social media can be a tool for culture change. The students were tasked with crafting their own creative responses that could inspire other teens to change gun culture in their communities. Some of the content they created was featured alongside an [opinion piece](#) in the education news outlet, *The 74*.

Important milestones for the pilot included:

- A culminating pitch competition for students in our Chicago Public Schools program with an audience of 500 of their peers, judged by Mayor Brandon Johnson and other local leaders



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

-Miracle, 17

20%

The percentage of students who said they definitely or probably would own a gun fell by over 20 points by the end of our six-week program, according to survey results.

- Incorporating “marketing mentors” from leading agencies Edelman and Havas to support our teen participants’ campaign development
- More than 200 submissions from After School Matters students, showing how guns impact their daily lives through art

The winning idea from our pitch competition was integrated into Project Unloaded’s newest campaign, *Guns Change the Story*, and lives on the campaign website [here](#). Read our case study about the pilot [here](#). In 2024, our Community Partner Program will expand to reach new students and new cities.

WELCOMING OUR SECOND YOUTH COUNCIL

In July, we welcomed Project Unloaded’s second [Youth Council](#), comprised of 14 high school and college students from across the country. Four members returned for their second year on our council and have taken new leadership roles this year, guiding their peers on social media engagement and SMS strategy. Youth Council members have spoken at film screenings, to reporters, and to their peers via social media posts and InstagramLive conversations they’ve hosted with experts in fields related to gun violence and social change.



“The big overall message is that guns make us less safe and more guns equals more gun violence.”

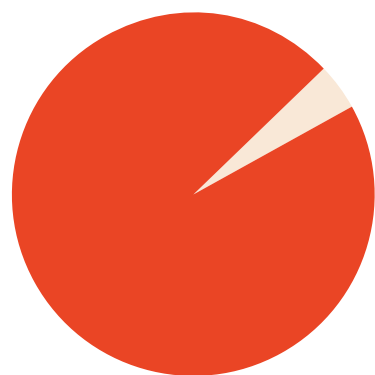
-Karly Scholz, Youth Council member to NBC29, September 2023

CHANGING CULTURE THROUGH THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

GUN SMOKE: A REPORT BY PROJECT UNLOADED'S YOUTH COUNCIL

Over the summer, it was 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 suspected that less scripted content could mean fewer guns on TV, and were curious about the stories with guns that would remain.

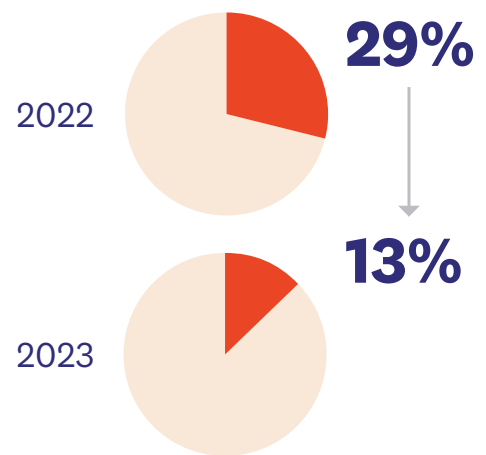
To answer those questions, Project Unloaded's Youth Council created a first-of-its-kind research report comparing primetime network television from the last week of September in 2022 and the last week of September in 2023. After watching and coding more than 150 hours of content, they found the old axiom "if it bleeds it leads" doesn't hold up: While gun content dropped dramatically in 2023, ratings did not. The report was released via an [exclusive in Variety](#). Read the [full report here](#).



96%

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

Rate of gun appearances across network shows, excluding CBS



RUN AMOK: AN INSPIRING FILM PARTNERSHIP

In 2023, Project Unloaded became the official nonprofit partner for the brilliant short film, [Run Amok](#). With a lot of creativity and heart, the film tells the story of a teen girl processing a tragic shooting that took place at her school 10 years prior by writing a musical about it. Using comedy and satire, the film invites audiences to think differently about gun violence as viewed through the eyes of the young protagonist who — no surprise — is far more authentic than the adults who surround her. Youth Council members have joined in-person and virtual film screenings to provide context on gun culture and the need for change.



TIME

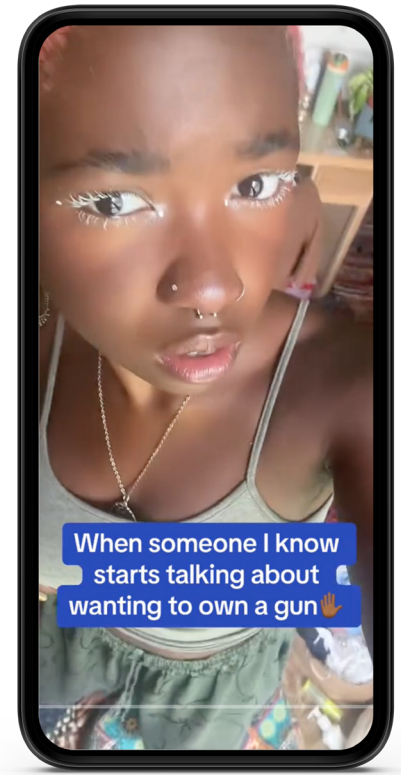
“With data-based work and thoughtful, humanistic storytelling, we can change the narrative on guns and finally slow our nation’s gun violence epidemic.”

– Nina Vinik, Project Unloaded founder and executive director in [Time](#), October 2023

ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH + MEDIA

In January 2023, Project Unloaded brought on Olivia Brown as its first Program Manager, supporting our Youth Council, youth-facing social media accounts and our new Community Partner Program. In addition, this year we expanded the team to include new partners supporting our social media campaigns, influencer engagement, the launch of our SMS program and organic social media presence. This growth led to more growth: Some of the teens who joined our Youth Council and came on as summer interns this year found us through our presence on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

We've earned more press coverage in well-known outlets, with notable stories in from [CNN](#), [Yahoo! News](#), [The 19th](#), [The Guardian](#), and [Variety](#). Several opinion pieces written by Nina Vinik, our founder, also ran this year, including a piece for [HuffPost](#) that quickly became the number one story on Apple News, as well as pieces in [Time](#), [The 74 Million](#) and [Salon](#).



Project Unloaded TikTok created by Sydni Brown, who found out about our brand via Instagram and joined us as an intern this summer and fall.

HUFFPOST

“Until we confront the basic truth that more guns make us less safe, we’ll continue to be stuck in a cycle of more gun violence and heartbreak.”

– Nina Vinik in HuffPost, October 2023

2024 PREVIEW

As we close out our second year in the story of Project Unloaded, we know that our work thus far has made an impact. We go into 2024 focused on growing our programs and capacity as we educate, engage and empower more teens to change the narrative — because the fact is that guns make us *less* safe.

Next year, our campaigns, community partnerships and research goals will all grow in important ways.

- We'll expand the *SNUG* campaign to reach more teens and engage our young supporters via text as well as social media
- We'll optimize and expand our newest campaign, *Guns Change the Story*
- Following our successful community partner pilot in summer 2023, we'll deepen our engagement with existing partners reaching teens in Chicago and expand our program to reach teens in new cities as well
- We'll conduct new research on the intersection between teen mental health, gun risks and gun violence, to inform a campaign that amplifies the facts around how guns make mental health crises more deadly
- Our youth council will double down on their work to expand our reach and elevate our message on social media and through local networks of teens

As we confront our deadly gun culture we will also, without question, be confronted with more gun violence. Our message remains clear and unequivocal: **It's the guns.** That's why we're laser focused on changing the narrative that drives up gun ownership and gun violence — the false notion that more guns make us safer. With today's young people leading the way, we're charting the course for a generational shift in gun use that will save lives.



Youth Council members (like Karly, pictured) led breakouts during our annual in-person meeting.



Supporters cheered on the 50 students who participated in our Chicago Public Schools pilot program at the culminating event in August.



CPS students learn from experts on changing gun culture through social media.