

GUN SMOKE

AN ANALYSIS OF HOW GUN
PORTRAYALS ON NETWORK
TV CHANGED FOLLOWING THE
2023 HOLLYWOOD STRIKES



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INTRODUCTION

In fall of 2023, TV executives were scrambling. Writers and actors were on strike and they had airwaves to fill, regardless. As a movement committed to understanding and changing gun culture, Project Unloaded's Youth Council wanted to understand how these dynamics would impact portrayals of guns on television. To answer that question, we watched a week's worth of primetime television on major networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC) and compared what networks ran in 2023 to the same week in 2022. [The result?](#) A rise in unscripted content and a dramatic drop in content showing gun use on network television. But the most important finding was this: *When given the choice, audiences opted for content without guns* — 96 percent of shows that won their time slots in our 2023 review were shows without guns.

This year, the Youth Council followed up with a second question. After the strikes ended, did TV creators and executives revert back to old content norms on guns? The answer: **Networks featured guns in 33% more primetime TV slots in 2024 than they did in 2023 — but shows without guns still won 96% of timeslots.**

Why does this matter? Because as [the Surgeon General declared over the summer](#), gun violence is a public health crisis. Most Americans [believe](#) that having a gun makes them safer, and more of them are choosing to [own](#) guns. But [having a gun at home increases the risk of homicide and suicide](#), and communities with more guns have more gun violence. Widespread belief in [the myth](#) that guns make us safer is contributing to this public health epidemic. And [particularly for young people](#), the portrayal of guns in entertainment is a key way we learn about guns.

Guns on TV can have real-world consequences. To stop gun violence, we must change the narrative on guns.



96%

Shows without guns won 96% of their timeslots in 2024.

METHODOLOGY

We watched and coded gun depictions and mentions in every show that ran between 8 pm ET and 11 pm ET across four major networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC) during the last week of September 2024 and that same week in 2022 and 2023. Together, we watched 200+ hours of primetime television. Because Fox switches to local news at 10 pm, we watched content from 8-10 pm ET from that network all three years.

Specific dates were September 25 to October 1 in 2022, September 24 to September 30 in 2023, and September 22 to September 28 in 2024. To add to our existing data sets from 2022 and 2023, this year we watched 62 blocks of TV, adding up to more than 75 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

For the purposes of this report, we define TV blocks as periods in which a network is running one program, whether it's an NFL game or a single episode of a scripted drama. We included all shows that aired during national primetime network TV hours, including sports and national newsmagazines to provide a full picture of primetime network TV content.²

3 YEARS

*Reviewed the same calendar week of TV for three consecutive years

200+

hours of primetime TV analyzed



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.

² Though gun culture in sports has been debated, with [multiple football players penalized](#) for “violent gestures” of making finger guns during games in 2024.

TOP FINDINGS

To understand how guns were portrayed on TV from 2022 to 2024, we logged every gun portrayal in comparable weeks of primetime TV across three years, accounting for over 200 hours of content. We recorded the type of person holding a gun, whether a gun was fired, why it was fired, and whether 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.

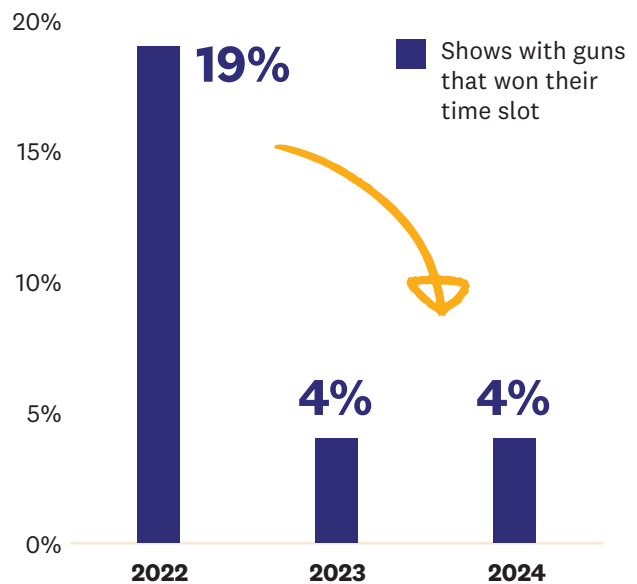
Our initial hypothesis — that guns would be on the rise this year following the strikes — proved correct. **What we didn't expect was that in spite of more guns appearing on TV, audiences would continue to favor content without guns.**

What Bleeds Didn't Lead — Viewers Preferred Content without Guns

In 2024, the only show to win its time slot and feature a firearm was an episode of High Potential on ABC that ran in the 10pm hour on Tuesday.

- In 2022, 81% of ratings winners were TV blocks without guns. In 2023, 96% of time slot winners didn't feature guns — but there were far fewer guns on TV. This year, more guns returned to TV, but again, 96% of time slots were won by shows with no guns — indicating that viewers prefer less violent content.

Ratings Winners Showing Guns, 2022 - 2024



Gun Portrayals Rose Once Strikes Ended

TV blocks featuring firearms increased from 2023 to 2024, returning to near pre-strike levels. **Across the four networks reviewed, 33% of TV blocks in 2024 included a gun, compared to 26% in 2023 and 36% in 2022.** Of these, CBS accounted for the majority of guns shown on TV (more on that below.)

- Excluding sports content, the percentage of TV blocks that included guns across other shows was 36% in 2024, compared to 30% in 2023 and 40% in 2022.

- Excluding CBS gun content, the percentage of TV blocks that included guns across other networks fell from 29% in 2022 to 13% in 2023, and then climbed back to 22% in 2024.
- In 2024, out of a total of 62 TV blocks watched, 20 episodes featured a gun, compared to just 15 episodes with a gun in 2023 and 25 total episodes with a gun in 2022.
- In 2023, although gun portrayals overall were down, the proportion of shows with guns fired on-screen was the highest of all three years, with 14 out of 15 shows with guns also portraying a gun being fired.

Gun Use Varies Widely by Network

In each of the three years we reviewed, CBS dominated on portrayals of guns and gun violence. In 2023, CBS ran 66% (10 out of a total of 15) TV episodes on all networks featuring a firearm. In 2024, CBS was responsible for 55% of episodes with guns on TV and 61% of episodes with a gun fired on TV. Meanwhile, NBC ran just one show featuring a firearm in the 2024 week we reviewed. Fox and ABC both ran four.

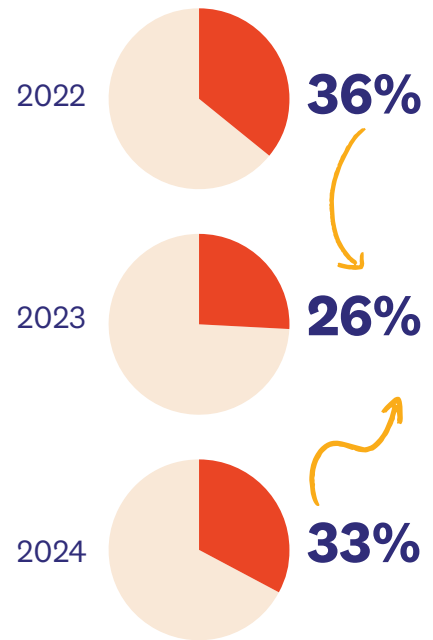
Gun Portrayals are Highest on Tuesdays...

Television’s most violent night is Tuesday, with the most guns shown and fired on that night in 2022, 2023, and 2024. But shows without guns led the ratings on all hour-slots of Tuesday nights all three years, with the exception of a 2024 episode of High Potential in the 10pm hour of ABC on Tuesday night.

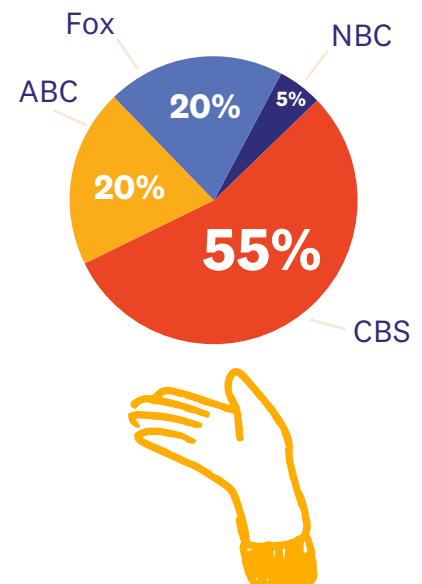
And Gun Portrayals are Lowest on Wednesdays.

In the three years we reviewed, television’s least violent night is Wednesday, largely because CBS takes a breather from guns that night to show Survivor and Amazing Race. In 2024, Thursday shows matched Wednesday’s television blocks with just one gun shown per night in primetime TV.

TV blocks including gun appearances across four networks



shows featuring guns by network in 2024



Gun Suicides, Which Account for the Bulk of Gun Deaths IRL, Are Ignored on TV

Despite the high rate of gun suicides in America, few people are aware of how household gun ownership impacts a family's risk of experiencing suicide — a finding we noted in our 2023 report. Network TV shows continue to overlook this crisis, missing an opportunity to raise awareness of the risk to people in gun-owning households. Only one episode in our 2024 review referenced the idea of gun suicides — a CBS episode of 48 hours featuring a mysterious death, potentially a staged gun suicide. Similarly, in 2022 and 2023, guns were shown or fired just once each year related to a suicide. We make recommendations on how TV shows could responsibly acknowledge the risks of gun suicide in the recommendations section of this report.

TV Reinforces Americans' Belief that Armed Criminals are an Ever-Present Threat

Unlike the last two years, the majority of episodes with guns on TV in 2024 involved the gun being carried by a person involved in a crime. There was a 62% increase in episodes with guns being fired by someone in the midst of a criminal act in 2024 compared to 2023. However, [data show](#) that real-life gun homicides and crime overall are declining. Media plays a role in how people envision safety and threats in their communities, and the outsize role of gun-wielding criminals on television may influence people's real-life views regarding guns and crime.

- In 2024, it was twice as likely to see episodes with guns shown carried for crime compared to guns for protection. This is a significant departure from 2022, when episodes were twice as likely to show guns being carried for protection than for commission of a crime, and 2023, when we coded an equal number of guns carried for protection, largely by law enforcement, and guns carried for crime.

The Dangers of Guns Are Ignored on TV

The risks posed by carrying and owning guns was not discussed at all this year, and discussed just once across all three years we reviewed. Instead, guns were generally carried by law enforcement

62%

increase in episodes with a gun fired by someone participating in a crime in 2024 compared to 2023.

officers for protection or by people looking to cause harm. TV did not demonstrate how the presence of a gun makes everyday life riskier for most Americans.

CONCLUSIONS

The Hollywood labor strikes shook up the industry in 2023, but our research shows that networks largely shifted content back to 2022 norms in 2024 when it comes to guns on TV. What's more, many of the same tired, false narratives around crime, defensive gun usage, and gun ownership are being repeated.

But there is good news, too. Audiences preferred content without guns, even as more guns once again dominated our televisions. So perhaps it's time for a reset. Rather than going back to the same tropes of guns and gun violence, what if writers and producers tried new narratives to build drama and suspense?

If we can move away from normalizing guns on screen, perhaps we can move away from normalizing them in real life, too. Slowly, with cultural leaders helping to lead the charge, the tide will turn on our deadly gun culture and America's gun violence epidemic. If we tell a different story about guns, together we can stop gun violence.

ABOUT PROJECT UNLOADED AND THE YOUTH COUNCIL

The mission of Project Unloaded is to create a new cultural narrative that guns make us less safe. Research shows that teens and young adults are forming opinions and making decisions about guns. Since its launch in 2022, Project Unloaded has reached millions of teens with the facts about how guns make people less safe through teen-facing cultural campaigns and community partnerships. Empowered with the facts, young people can choose on their own terms not to own or use guns and lead us to a safer future.

Young people are at the heart of everything we do at Project Unloaded. Our teen and young adult leaders are the creative engines behind our social media campaigns, reaching their peers with the life-saving message that guns make us less safe. Project Unloaded is proudly supported by two teams of young people. Our Youth Council advises on upcoming campaigns, shapes our digital presence, and develops their own creative and community projects to engage their networks around the message that we're safer unarmed. In 2024, we expanded our opportunities for young leaders, with the formation of our inaugural Creator Corps, which focuses on social media strategy and content creation. You can follow Project Unloaded on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Dan Romer, Research Director at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, for helpful comments about the data and findings.



@projectunloaded



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TELEVISION CREATORS

Updated October 2024

After reviewing a total of more than 200 hours of content, we have some recommendations for those working on network TV shows.

1. **TV shapes how Americans understand the risks of guns and perpetuates dangerous myths about their role in our society. Knowing that, carefully weigh whether a gun is actually necessary to tell the story.** In our work to reach and educate Americans about the risks that come with owning and using guns, we often encounter resistance based on people’s fears that the world is a dangerous place, where only guns will make them safer.

Often, the hypothetical situations in which people describe needing and using a gun feel like something straight out of a television show — and maybe that’s because they are. [Research shows](#) that the portrayal of guns on television can impact people’s views on guns in real life. Our findings show that guns are not necessary to earn strong ratings. Consider that many Americans watch TV for joy, escape, and respite from a culture of violence around us — we encourage Hollywood to offer more varied narratives, instead of perpetuating a dangerous status quo.

2. **When a gun is used on television, consider stories 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. It is similarly most likely that someone will harm themselves with a gun that they own, whether that is due to suicide or the increasing [phenomenon of unintentional shootings](#) with unsecured guns.

On screen, across three years we viewed just one mention of the risks that come with carrying a gun, and there were minimal mentions of gun suicide. Balance portrayals of guns with information about the risks of keeping a gun at home and carrying a gun in public.

“Consider that many Americans watch TV for joy, escape, and respite from a culture of violence around us — we encourage Hollywood to offer more varied narratives, instead of perpetuating a dangerous status quo.”

3. 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. America — and especially its school communities — would be safer if more people thought twice before living with a gun.

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 in real life and it's unlikely they hit their target.³

- [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. **Similarly, avoid glorifying guns as a reliable mechanism of self-defense for private civilians.** Ordinary Americans watch guns on TV and get the impression that firing a gun is a reliable and easy way to solve problems, when in reality the “defensive gun usage” myth [has been debunked](#) by experts.

Defensive gun usage is rare. TV shows that mythologize defensive gun use embolden a “shoot first, ask questions later” culture that escalates otherwise nonviolent situations and leads to killings of unarmed civilians.

“Even for law enforcement officers, firing a gun is rare in real life and it's unlikely they hit their target.”

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

6. 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. For example, **depict people deciding against getting a gun or removing guns from the home because of the increased suicide risk for families with firearms at home.**

The success of so many shows without guns on TV provides hope. It shows that there are plenty of compelling stories to tell that avoid guns altogether, without giving up viewership. 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.

“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.

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC
2022	16	21	15	18
2023	14	19	14	10
2024	15	21	13	13

Scripted vs Unscripted Shows in Primetime Network TV

Note: Though the hours of television watched across all three 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
2022	31	24	6

Total Gun Use Across Network TV

	Episodes Including a Gun	% of Episodes Including a Gun	% of Episodes Including a Gun, Excluding Sports	Episodes with a Gun Fired	% of Episodes with a Gun Fired	% of Episodes Including a Gun, Excluding Sports
2022	25	36%	40%	12	17%	19%
2023	15*	26%	30%	14	25%	28%
2024	20	33%	36%	13	21%	24%

*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
2024	4	11	4	1

Episodes Including a Gun Fired

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC
2022	1	6	1	4
2023	1	9	2	2
2024	2	8	2	1

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
2024	4	3	6	1	1	3	3

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
2024	2	3	5	1	0	1	1

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 2023), and using a gun for intimidation (4 in 2022). The risks that come with using a gun were mentioned just once across all three years in a 2022 episode of La Brea on NBC. No guns were carried for “other” reasons in 2024.

	Guns Carried for Protection	Guns Carried for Crime	Guns Carried for Other Reason
2022	24	13	5
2023	10	10	2
2024	7	13	0

Who Carried the Gun

Note: The following chart analyzes who carried guns across shows. We coded every instance of a person carrying a gun in the shows in which a gun (or several guns) were shown. This chart reflects our tallies of how many guns were shown, even if they appear on the same shows or are carried for the same reason by several characters.

	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
2024	13	8	15

Who Fired a Gun

Note: The following chart analyzes how guns were fired across shows.

	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
2024	7	0	13

Episodes with Guns by Hour

Note: Fox switches to local news at 10pm so for Fox, we could only code 8-10 pm all three 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
2024	6	7	10

Episodes without Guns that Won the Timeslot

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

	Number of TV Blocks	TV Blocks Winning without Guns	TV Blocks Winning without Guns Fired
2022	22	18	20
2023	21	20	20
2024	21	20	20

Ratings Appendix

Note: All ratings information was pulled from publicly available numbers on [spoilertv.com](https://www.spoilertv.com). Hours all EST.

2024

Sunday, September 22, 2024

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 23, 2024

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 24, 2024

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Dancing with the Stars	ABC	No	No
9-10	America's Got Talent	NBC	No	No
10-11	High Potential	ABC	Yes	Yes

Wednesday, September 25, 2024

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Survivor	CBS	No	No
9-10	Big Brother	CBS	No	No
10-11	The Floor	FOX	No	No

Thursday, September 26, 2024

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	Big Brother	CBS	No	No
9-10	Doctor Odyssey	ABC	No	No
10-11	Grey's Anatomy	ABC	No	No

Friday, September 27, 2024

Hour	Highest Rated Show	Network	Was a Gun Shown?	Was a Gun Fired?
8-9	College Football	FOX	No	No
9-10	20/20	ABC	No	No
10-11	Fire Country	CBS	Yes	Yes

Saturday, September 28, 2024

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

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